Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

15¢

THIRD OCTOBER NUMBER

HONDO TRAILS

BY AUSTIN CORCORAN
AND M. J. COREY

BEGINNING A NEW SERIAL BY L. P. HOLMES

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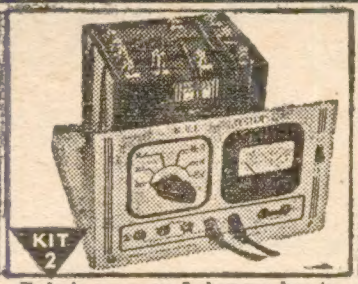

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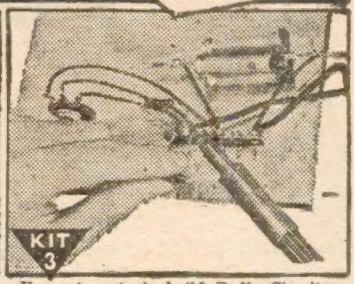

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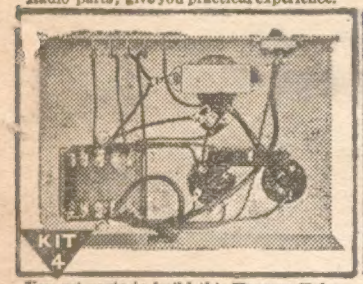

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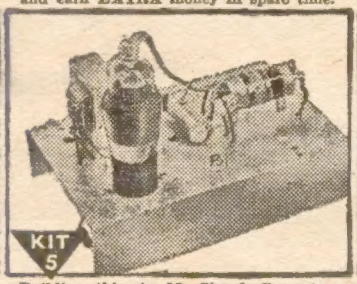

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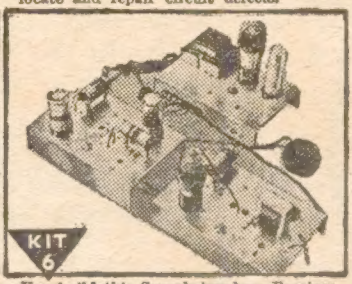

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THIRD OCTOBER NUMBER

October 19, 1945
Volume 128, Number 4

RANCH ROMANCES

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

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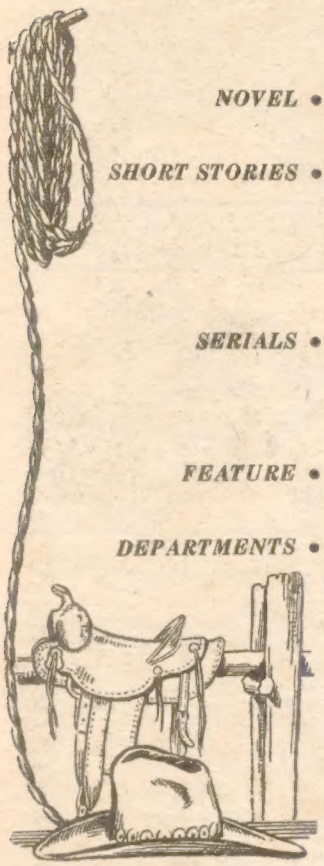

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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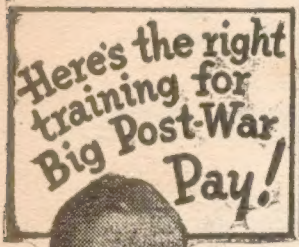

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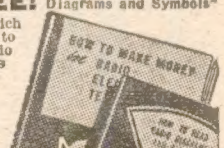

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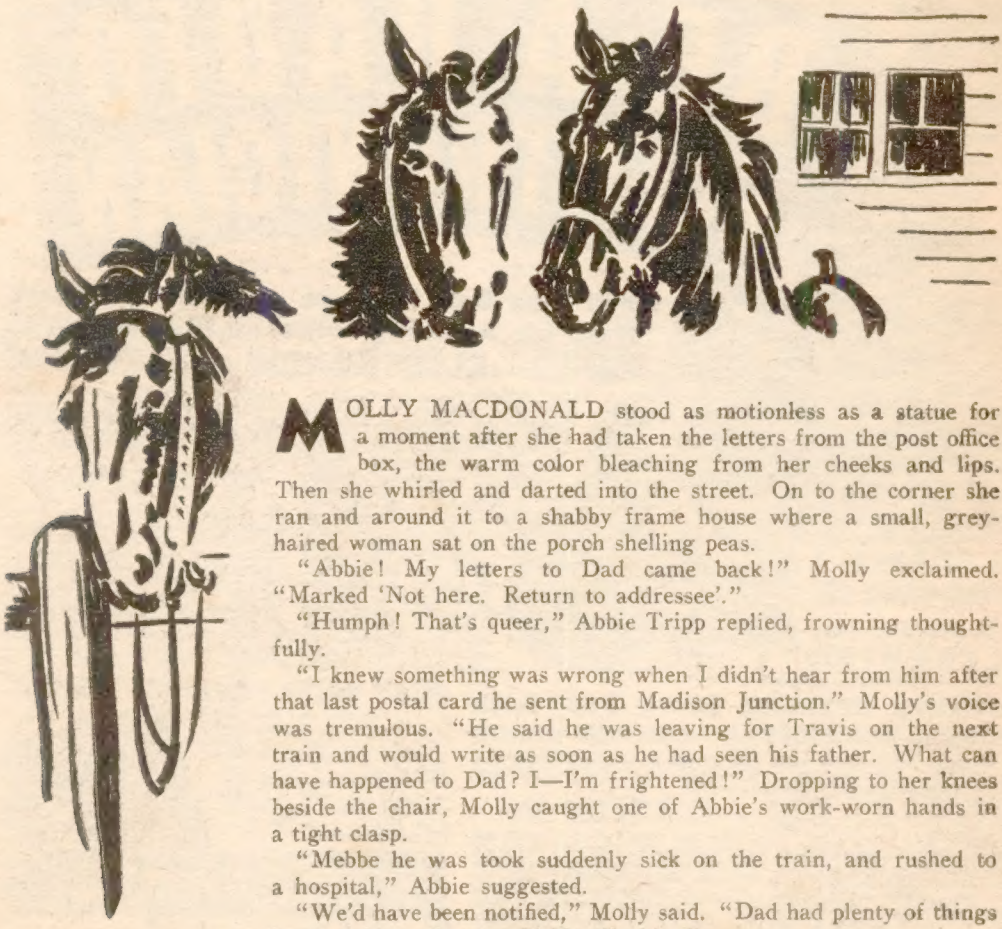
HONDO TRAILS

BY AUSTIN CORCORAN AND MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY

MOLLY MacDONALD went to the Hondo Ranch to find her father, and ran plunk into murder, arson and romance, all mixed up together!



MOLLY MACDONALD stood as motionless as a statue for a moment after she had taken the letters from the post office box, the warm color bleaching from her cheeks and lips. Then she whirled and darted into the street. On to the corner she ran and around it to a shabby frame house where a small, grey-haired woman sat on the porch shelling peas.

"Abbie! My letters to Dad came back!" Molly exclaimed. "Marked 'Not here. Return to addressee'."

"Humph! That's queer," Abbie Tripp replied, frowning thoughtfully.

"I knew something was wrong when I didn't hear from him after that last postal card he sent from Madison Junction." Molly's voice was tremulous. "He said he was leaving for Travis on the next train and would write as soon as he had seen his father. What can have happened to Dad? I—I'm frightened!" Dropping to her knees beside the chair, Molly caught one of Abbie's work-worn hands in a tight clasp.

"Mebbe he was took suddenly sick on the train, and rushed to a hospital," Abbie suggested.

"We'd have been notified," Molly said. "Dad had plenty of things in his pockets that would identify him."

"Well, Molly, I don't want to make you any more scared," Abbie said lugubriously, "but it looks pretty suspicious to me. And any time I'm in doubt about anything, I always think the worst."

"You—you mean—" Molly's voice faltered and broke on a sob.

"I mean," Abbie Tripp declared bluntly, "that David MacDonald went to a place where he mightn't have been welcome."

"But his father wrote for him to come," Molly protested.

"Humph! Got to thinkin' of his own flesh and blood now he's old an' sick an' about to die. Mebbe if Dave got there, the old man meant to leave him a good chunk of property other folks have counted on gettin' their hands on," Abbie said, nodding her head for emphasis. "Your Pa pulled out from the ranch after his father married a second wife and she brought with her a coupla sons that was ornery as the devil. Dave couldn't stand 'em no more'n a pair of skunks. When you folks lived around here, your Ma told me them two stepbrothers of Dave's had no use for him. They'd have a lot less use for him showin' up now. Suppose they stopped him?"

"They couldn't, without doing something dreadful!" Molly exclaimed. "It seems crazy to think about anything like that."

"Not a bit crazier than things you read about in the newspapers," Abbie insisted with an obstinate tightening of her lips. "You can't do no harm by bein' suspicious, and actin' according. Why don't you telegraph the sheriff to search for your Dad?"

Molly's slender body went taut as a bowstring. The blue eyes that had gone almost black from the intensity of her emotions now held a leaping flame. "No," she said, getting to her feet. "I am going to Travis, myself!"

After a few moments of excited discussion, she said, "Unless he has seen Dad, my grandfather doesn't know of my existence."

Abbie narrowed her bright eyes speculatively. "Well, my dear," she suggested, "if that's so, don't tell anybody in Travis who you are, till you do some pokin' around. You finished trainin' for a nurse, even if you ain't practiced it. Pertend you're lookin' for a place to locate in your profession. That's plenty excuse for askin' a lot of questions."

Molly looked doubtful. "I'd hate pretending I was somebody else," she objected. "No, I couldn't do that."

"Your name is Molly Vance MacDonald, just use the first part of it," Abbie urged. "If them fellers has done anything turrible to your father, they are mighty dangerous. Your Ma was my best friend from the time we was little girls until she and your Pa moved up to Canada. It scares me plumb stiff to think of you traipsin' off alone on this business. If you don't promise to do it my way, Molly, I'll close down the boarding house and go with you!"

"Okay, then I shall be Molly Vance," she agreed, giving Abbie a quick, hard hug. "And you are not to worry. I shall be perfectly safe."

The words were spoken with confidence. And it was in the same mood that she started later that day on the long trip from northern Montana to the town for which her father had set out more than a month earlier.

On the train she searched her memory for every fact she had learned from either parent concerning Paul and Fred Darbie, David MacDonald's stepbrothers. Even though his impressions of them were those of a boy in his teens, she believed they were not far wrong. While he was quick-tempered and impulsive, her father's opinions were invariably those of a just man. And he always declared that the mother of Paul and Fred was a "pretty decent sort—noways like her sons."

The Darbie brothers had been ruthless and given to sly plotting to gain their ends. They had managed to constantly put hot-headed David in the wrong, until he could no longer endure the situation.

He had rarely held communication with his father, who had believed his son to be still in Canada. The recent letter from the old man had been forwarded from there. When David read this he had remarked, "He must be pretty bad off to write like that. Sounds as if he's scared of something, too. Well, I'll take a trip down there. I'd been thinking about going to see him. The Darbies have had their own way too long. My mother brought half the Hondo Ranch to my father when they were married. That much, at least, should come to me, and to you, her granddaughter, not to the children of my father's second wife!"

Molly hadn't wanted any claim made to the property on her account. Now tears stung her eyelids as she thought that it was partly for her benefit David MacDonald had gone back to the home from which he had fled so many years ago.

Molly's heart beat high with excitement while the car wheels rattled over switch connections and past loading pens and chutes to stop before the old frame station in Travis. Restraining her impatience she was last to descend the steps. There were not many bystanders and she could picture her father arriving on the night train without attracting attention from anybody who would remember him. This discouraging thought was vigorously thrust from her as she went towards

the station. She had promised to wire Abbie Tripp immediately on arrival at the journey's end.

Some half dozen cowboys stood near the building. Aware of their interested glances, Molly avoided looking at them as she passed and entered the doorway. When she had written the message and signed it "Molly Vance", she saw that the operator was busy at his telegraph key, so she turned to the open window at her side. The glass in the partly-raised sash had been thickly soaped in preparation for cleaning and she could see only through the aperture below. The faces of the group outside were not visible, but she could see the lower parts of their bodies. Her gaze was caught and held, and her eyes widened, as she stared at the tie-clasp holding the ends of a gay neckerchief against a tan shirt. This clasp displayed a cleverly hand-wrought silver horse, posed in a prancing step with head up and spiritedly pointed ears.

Molly's breath caught in her throat. The familiarity of the ornament shocked her into temporary paralysis. Her last glimpse of it had been when her father kissed her good-by and stepped aboard the train to start for Travis, the clasp plainly showing in the opening formed by the unbuttoned front of his coat.

The silver horse was distinctive. People were always remarking that they had seen nothing like it. A gift from Molly's mother, it was one of her father's most prized possessions. He would never have willingly parted with it. Nothing could have so confirmed her deepest fears as seeing the tie clasp in the possession of another.

SHE was aroused from her shocked trance by a movement of the group on the station platform. She must see the face of this cowboy who was wearing the silver horse. He must be identified.

Whirling from the window she darted through the doorway and on towards the corner of the building around which voices and thudding bootheels were receding. At the end of the station she swung to the right, her gaze fixed on the several figures moving up the street from the railroad. She failed to see the drop from the brick platform to the ground. Her speeding feet suddenly found space beneath them and Molly pitched forward. An upflung arm protected her face but the sharp plunge downward forced the breath from her lungs and left her limp and dazed.

An expression of alarm vaguely penetrated her dulled hearing. Then she was being lifted with a gentleness and strength to which she gratefully relaxed. She sensed that her head was resting in the hollow of a shoulder. Under her cheek was the velvety softness of a suede jacket that carried the mingled fragrance of Western air and tobacco.

"Hurt you much?" a concerned voice broke into the pleasant semi-consciousness. It was a nice voice. Very nice. Pitched on a low note, it held vibrations that sent little tingles through Molly's nerves.

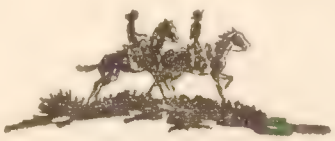
Brushing a hand across her eyes, she opened them. Above her face was bent a tanned one, its expression one that matched the voice, and she thought it equally nice. Molly inhaled a long breath. "No, I guess not," she replied. "Nothing's damaged but my pride." She smiled wryly as she glanced down at her dusty dress and torn stocking.

"Only broken bones count," her rescuer declared cheerfully.

When she drew herself from his clasping arms, he took a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and commenced dusting off her skirt. "I thought a star had fallen from the sky, when you landed," he told her. "I was coming from the express office and hadn't a bit of warning. You just came darting down square in front of me." His eyes were twinkling but there was seriousness behind the smile on his lips.

"I was in a terrible hurry to catch somebody," she explained, her expression clouding as she remembered the cause of that haste.

"I'll say you were!" he exclaimed. "Sup-



pose you take it easy for a bit and let me do the running for you." He stooped to pick up her purse and dust off the leather.

"Thanks, but I won't bother now," she said. "I'll get my things and go on to the hotel."

"S'pose I walk over with you, he offered promptly. "It isn't far to the Travis House. If you have anything in the baggage room, let me get it."

"Only a suitcase," Molly replied, taking the check stub from her purse. "I'll send a telegram and be right out."

"Please don't *hurry,*" he advised mischievously.

Molly smiled, though her thoughts had never been so shadowed. The silver horse seemed to be suspended before her eyes, leading her on to more and more grim apprehensions.

WHEN she rejoined the cowboy, he introduced himself. His name was Willard Rockwell. "But everybody calls me 'Rock'," he said. "I am with the Hondo outfit, owned by J. J. MacDonald, a real old-timer."

Molly suppressed an exclamation. "Is that a large ranch?" she asked.

"Biggest any place in this country," he replied. "With stock that can't be beat anywhere. Too bad the old boy is passing out of the picture so fast."

"Is the owner ill?"

"Mac had an accident a few weeks ago," Rock said. "His team got scared and threw him out. They say he'll never get around again."

"Has he children to inherit his property?" she ventured.

"Two stepsons, that's all. Paul and Fred Darbie." Rock's voice had lost its recent enthusiasm. "They live at the ranch, also Paul's wife and son. Fred's an old bachelor. They've got a finger in almost every pie in town. That's Darbie Brothers' Garage." He indicated a building across the street. "Fred runs that. Paul is a director in the bank. They regard the ranch as something to get money from any minute they happen to want it. Old Mac's different. A real cowman. He'd never think of selling stock at a loss merely to get loose cash into his hands for some speculation. He'd go easy and ride out bad years. Mac's a builder, not a money grabber. The ranch has always been his life, and he doesn't see much beyond it."

"You like him," Molly said softly.

"Yes, I do," Rock admitted. "Guess he has a plenty hard streak, and you can't change his opinion very easy, but he has what it takes to make a man and you can't help respecting the old boy a lot."

"Didn't he have any family of his own?" she persisted.

"Might have, but guess they must've died," Rock said. "I never saw anybody that belonged to him and I've been at the Hondo more than four years."

ROCK and MOLLY

They had arrived in front of a sprawling, two-storied building that bore the hotel sign. "I sure can't understand how I came to waste all that time!" he exclaimed, looking down at Molly ruefully. "I wanted to talk about *you*. How long will you be staying in Travis?"

"I'm not sure," she replied, her face clouding as she took what seemed a decisive step on the trail of deceit. "I'm—well, I'm looking for a place to locate. I'm a trained nurse."

"That so? I didn't know nurses ever came so young and—Excuse me," he broke off, reddening beneath his tan. "What I want to say is, can I drop by tomorrow or next day and see what you decide?"

"Of course," she told him with a deepening of the warmth in her cheeks as she read the eagerness of his expression.

Molly turned in the hotel doorway to watch him striding away with that free swing of shoulder natural to men who have spent much time in the saddle. With Rock went a certain feeling of warmth and security which had enveloped her since encountering him. She would have liked to call him back, if only to hear him speak in the voice which held mixed notes of laughter and seriousness.

Instead, she went into the hotel. While she arranged for a room the friendly, wrinkled proprietor talked garrulously in a squeaky voice. She could imagine he was a confirmed

gossip and for the first time was glad for the screen of a name that was not MacDonald.

While Molly took off her traveling dress, washed, then brushed her straight, silky hair, she summed up the situation. The result was depressing. The Darbies were people of importance in the community. To connect them with anything like a criminal plot would be nearly impossible. If David MacDonald arrived at the Hondo Ranch, he could not have remained there long. Rock would have known something about him and of his relationship to old Mac. Yet her father must have been in the vicinity. She regarded the silver horse as satisfactory proof of that. Happening to see the cowboy wearing the tie clasp had been a fortunate break, but she could not count on further coincidences to work out the mystery of what had happened to David MacDonald.

MAC

Coming to Travis and poking around to trace her father had seemed fairly reasonable while Abbie was talking. Now it not only appeared absurd, but Molly was sure it was impossible. How could she even discover the identity of the wearer of the silver horse, without asking questions which would arouse curiosity?

SYLVIA

CHET

"I shall have to talk with the sheriff," she decided with her natural impulsiveness.

MOLLY dressed hastily, but with care. She knew the bronze-colored dress was becoming but she had no idea of the loveliness of the girl who was wearing it. Her features were irregularly modeled but the eyes were a deep, clear blue, with tenderness in their depths. There was sweetness and generosity in her mouth while a dimple kept her chin from a too-determined cast. The chestnut hair needed neither curls nor waves to bring out its rich coloring and satiny sheen. When Molly descended the staircase into the lobby, it was not astonishing that the little, wrinkle-faced man at the desk watched her with distinct approval.

She went along the street past Darbie Brothers' Garage, noting that this was a surprisingly busy establishment with a large workshop in the rear. A number of cars bearing "For Sale" signs were displayed in the wide front portion of the building. At one side was an office of which one wall was almost entirely glass. It seemed a highly successful business, further emphasizing the solidity of the Darbies in the community.

The sheriff's office was at the left of the door giving entrance to the jail building. As Molly entered, a bushy-haired, big-boned man lowered his feet from the desk top and laid aside a pipe.

"Are you the sheriff? she asked.

"No'm," he replied. "I'm Deputy Fish, takin' Hamp Webb's place for the time being."

"When will the sheriff be back?" Molly asked.

"Mebbe in an hour," the deputy returned. "He took his brother-in-law, Paul Darbie, to

FRED and PAUL

look at some stock he thought might've been stole from the Hondo Ranch."

"Oh!" Molly murmured. "I—I guess I won't wait," she added, now more anxious to avoid the sheriff than she had previously been to see him.

Could anything be more unfortunate, she wondered as she turned back into Main Street. The sheriff closely related by marriage with the Darbie family. At best it would have been awkward to explain her masquerade under a false identity. It looked queer not to have at once made inquiry at the Hondo Ranch. What reason could she give for not having done so? Molly was so disturbed that straight thinking was impossible.

Passing the garage she was tempted to linger for a glance into the office. Perhaps the manager was there and she would like to have a look at one of the brothers. Strolling towards a display car, Molly pretended to be examining it.

"Interested in buying a car?" a drawling voice asked, startlingly close to her side.

"Not especially," she said, glancing around at the owner of the voice.

He was young with ardent brown eyes and curling black hair. His clothing was a sporty imitation of a cowboy outfit and worn with a swagger. And his smile had too much assurance to please Molly.

"I thought I recognized you when you came up the street," he said. "Now I know I was right—it's *you.*"

Her face was expressionless. "You are mistaken," she said coldly. "We have never met before and you could not possibly know me."

"But I do," he laughed, with evident enjoyment of her manner.

Molly turned a disdainful shoulder to him and started away. It was such a stupid method of striking up acquaintance.

"Don't be in a hurry," he said, following her. "Please, *Molly!*"

HER feet halted automatically. Then the startled feeling passed. He must have learned her name from the hotel register. She went on, still ignoring him.

"How can such a gorgeous girl as you, Molly, be so unfriendly?" he asked, keeping close at her heels. "Surely you can spare a few minutes to talk about, well, say a little town in northern Montana, a town named La Due."

"La Due!" she exclaimed, gripping her hands tightly. How could he know where she had come from? She had registered from Spokane, where she took her nurse's training. She faced him with a dauntlessly tilted chin. "I still insist that we are not acquainted," she said, "and I don't care to discuss anything with you."

"Too bad," he sighed heavily, "because I like you immensely." He took her wrist in a clasp she knew it would be hard to throw off. "And I'm awfully tickled that you came way down here."

In spite of efforts for self control, a tremor betrayed her nervousness. She wouldn't admit that he was right nor would she question him, keenly as she wanted to know how he had obtained his knowledge. He was a type she detested. Sure that he knew exactly how to impress a girl, confident that she could not help liking him.

"You might as well talk to me," he urged, "for I'm going to walk along with you. We're going to have a lot of fun when you stop being so stand-offish."

"That will never be," she retorted with spirit.

Nor could she be tempted to further speech, though he persisted in walking to the hotel with her. He was greeted with offhand familiarity by everyone they passed, indicating that he was well known in town. Two girls called to him with gay cordiality while they stared curiously at his silent companion.

When they reached the Travis House Molly turned in abruptly.

"By-by, honey," he said, "till next time. If you're nice and friendly, I'll tell you some more about yourself then." She heard his teasing laugh as he moved away.

Worried and angered she went on into the lobby. A child was playing on the staircase. Molly called her to the door. "Do you know that man going along the street?" she asked.

"Of course," the little girl replied. "That's Chet Darbie."

"Darbie!" Molly exclaimed under her her breath. "Where does he live?"

"Way out in the country on a big ranch," the child said. "His uncle runs the big garage. Chet drives grand cars."

Molly scarcely heard the last words. How had Chet Darbie known who she was? She was positive that she had never seen him, prior to the last half hour. Yet he had recognized her immediately.

Her mind was in such confusion she felt as if she must scream to relieve the tension. If only she could talk with somebody! This final mystery seemed unendurable.

"I'll have to make some definite move tomorrow," she decided, "even if it's to go directly to the Hondo Ranch and demand to see grandfather MacDonald. I'll stop hiding like a silly, scared little fool, and *do* something!"

ROCK stood at the gate of the pasture looking thoughtfully at the colts on the far side of the fence. There was pride in his eyes and a sense of triumph in his heart. They were truly beauties. They had the build of animals dreamed of by keen horsemen. Their muscular co-ordination was perfect. It was something to have bred stock like that. He felt a jubilance for his share in their raising. It was a shame old Mac couldn't see the bunch. He could. Why not?

Turning Rock gazed towards the ranch house. While they were being moved that morning it would be no trick at all to take them past the windows of Mac's room. It made Rock shudder when he thought of the dreary weeks the old cowman had been imprisoned between those four walls. For seventy years or more he had roamed the ranges, as free to go as any creature of the wilds. That was his life. Confined to the house must be so like death that the actual ending of his days would be welcome. Rock came to a decision. And setting his jaw determinedly, he sprang into his saddle and loped towards the house.

Nobody was visible but he knew the family had finished their breakfast, later than that served to the cowboys in the big kitchen, where Mac had always eaten early with his crew of riders. When he was tying his horse not far from the porch he heard Sylvia Darbie's voice. No mistaking that shrill note, which always set Rock's teeth on edge.

"Paul, *how* much longer is this going to go on?" she demanded. "You insisted he wouldn't live two weeks. You keep saying he'll have a stroke, or something, and go any time. But he's still here, having to be waited on, upsetting the whole house."

"Mac's failing, Sylvia, I can see it," Paul said placatingly.

"That's more than anybody else can," she snapped. "Sarah says she won't do the cooking if she has to keep running in there to look after him. And I'm not going to fetch and carry for the old devil. We could manage when Joe was here to help. With him quitting it's just too much."

"Well, you could drive in with me this morning and see if Lib Zeller will come and give you a hand," Paul suggested.

"Lib's so deaf," Sylvia grumbled.

At that moment Rock appeared in the doorway. "Good morning," he said pleasantly. "We're moving the steeldust colts and I thought Mac might get a kick out of seeing them. It's no trouble for the boys to take 'em past his window. I believe he's prouder of that string than anything else on the ranch."

"We-ell, I guess that will be all right," Paul replied with some hesitation.

"I'll tell him," Rock offered, going towards an inner room. "Come to think of it I haven't seen Mac for weeks."

"The doctor hasn't favored visitors," Paul said stiffly, following the cowboy. "I thought I had made that clear. We fear a stroke and any excitement might bring one on."

Rock had formed no definite picture of conditions but his first glimpse of the old cowman was something of a shock. The back and foot rest of a wheelchair had been adjusted to form something like a couch, on which Mac lay, his face a bony mask, the sunken eyes staring dully up at the ceiling. He paid no attention to their entrance until Rock spoke. Then his head turned slowly on the pillow. There was almost no expression on his face, which bore scars of recent injuries. Strips of adhesive tape gave support to his jaw on one side. Part of a foot and ankle were in a cast and he lay as if his body had still further injuries.

"I'm going to wheel you over by the window, Old Timer," Rock said, going on to explain his plan. There was a slight clearing of the dulled eyes. Pallid lips moved stiffly as if to form words but no sound came from them. "Why don't you stay over here," Rock suggested, "where you can stretch your eyesight. Doesn't do a fellow any good to keep looking at walls. You're doing a great job of mending. When you get that dingus off your foot, you'll be getting around okay."

NOW there was a distinct glint in the eyes, and a hand stirred feebly as if to catch hold of Rock's. He clasped the gaunt fingers of the old man, talking on in a matter-of-fact tone. From the corner of his

eye he could see Paul frowning and shaking his head.

When they left the room, Rock remarked, "It wouldn't surprise me to see Mac up and in the saddle again."

"That's because you only saw him for a moment," Paul's voice was cold. "It wouldn't surprise *me* if this little flicker of excitement put out his candle for good. We know that Mac is liable to drop off any minute."

The lack of feeling in his manner gave Rock a peculiar sensation. He knew Paul Darbie was a self-contained man but this was more than control, it was a total absence of emotion. He had also comprehended that the Darbies were avidly anticipating the time when Hondo Ranch would come into their possession. He now suspected that they were already considering themselves as owners, that Mac was a negligible factor in the situation. He was the same as dead. This suspicion became conviction when Paul spoke as they went out on the porch.

"I have been meaning to tell you," he began, "not to count on building the new stable. I have countermanded the order for the material."

"But Mac—" Rock began.

Paul checked him with a gesture. "Mac is out of it," he declared. "Surely you must see that he never will be active again. We doubt if he understands much of what is said to him. He is dropping into a state of coma, which prevails most of the time. That stable means nothing to him. My bother and I are not interested in expensive experiments with horse stock. That is folly. We plan to go in entirely for beef, where there is sure and substantial return, and a much quicker turn-over, when necessary. Mac clung to the idea that horses are important. They definitely are *not.*"

"But don't you think—" Rock began again, to be cut off even more sharply.

"You're too much of a yes-man for Mac," Paul said curtly. "Of course, while Mac remains conscious, no definite moves will be made. When matters pass under our sole control, however, we shall at once get rid of those steeldust colts. Think they will bring a good price?"

"That depends," Rock replied, his tone as curt as that of the older man.

As he rode away from the ranch house Rock decided that he had never seen so cold an eye in a human head, as Paul's had been when he was referring to his stepfather. Rock had considered the two brothers a hard-boiled pair, but previously this had been of no personal concern. Rock had been hired by Mac and had been responsible only to him. The cowman had not been too old to stand firmly on his own feet and administer ranch affairs without interference from his stepsons. The situation had now reversed itself, a distinctly unpleasant conclusion to accept.

When the colts were turned past the house, Rock rode close to the window to salute the old man he could see lying back in the wheeled chair. It looked as if a gaunt arm came up to return the salute, but Rock thought that he was mistaken, Mac hadn't strength to make the gesture. He hoped the chair would be left where its occupant could look out of doors and feel some of the sunshine that slanted through the window.

"I wouldn't put it past that bunch to shove Mac into the darkest corner of the room," he fumed. "They are just counting the hours till he passes out of the picture. Yep, it wouldn't be safe to bet a thin dime on Mac's chances of ever getting out of that chair. Neglect, that's what he's getting, and spelled with capital letters, too!"

It was some time before the grimness of Rock's thoughts relaxed. Then he was reminded of his errand into town the previous day and remembered the girl he encountered at the railway station. A smile lifted his mouth corners. Thinking of her made him feel happy and excited. She had a nice way of smiling, with her eyes as well as her lips. Yet there had been shadows deep in the blue eyes. Rock wondered about that. A girl like her shouldn't have serious worries.

WHEN he rode into the ranch late that afternoon, he was still thinking about Molly, and figuring out an excuse to take him into Travis the next day.

The evening meal was eaten at the same time by everyone on the premises. When Sarah rang a bell, Rock and the three other cowboys started from the bunkhouse. He was in the lead and when he opened the screen door he halted so abruptly that Posy Teal, coming close behind, bumped against him.

Entering the kitchen from an inner room was a girl wearing white shoes and stockings and a crisp white dress. She was carrying a tray with glasses and a bowl and spoon. It was Molly. A Molly with a distinctly pro-

fessional manner and serious expression. There was not the least hint of a smile in her eyes now, but the shadows were darker.

She gave Rock a nod of recognition. Something like relief flickered across her features, gone so quickly Rock could scarcely believe he had seen it at all.

Sarah indicated the girl with a motion of the big fork she had been using to lift beefsteaks to the platter. "Meet the nurse, boys," she said, "Name's Molly Vance. She's come to look after Mac. And these fellers is," she pointed to each in the turn mentioned, "Rock, our top hand and horse breaker, Posy Teal, Pat Flynn and Eb Stoddard."

The appearance of Paul Darbie, his wife and brother froze the cowboys to silence but they eyed Molly with surreptitious admiration. Rock could read their thoughts on discovery of such a girl coming to the Hondo. But he was unprepared for the incident following the belated arrival of Chet Darbie. Entering with his usual breezy nonchalance, Chet at once spied Molly, who was sitting opposite Rock at the table.

"Why, hul-lo, Molly!" he exclaimed in a delighted tone. "Am I glad to see you here!"

"You are acquainted?" Sylvia Darbie exclaimed with open surprise and disapproval.

"Sure, I know Molly," Chet replied with an amused laugh.

Rock felt a dozen reactions. Molly had given him no hint that she knew any member of the Darbie family. In fact he had understood she was acquainted with nobody in Travis. Her expression now betrayed nothing. After a cool glance at Chet she centered attention on her plate. Chet's statement almost had to be accepted since Molly made no denial.

Sylvia was speaking coldly. "You told me, Miss Vance," she said, "that you had made no acquaintances in town."

"Don't boost your blood pressure, Mom," Chet advised airily. "I knew Molly before she came to Travis. She used to be up in—"

"Oh, you met her when you were in Spokane!" Sylvia interrupted with her customary disregard for what others might be saying. "Was she one of your nurses when you had that flu attack?"

During Chet's last speech Molly's fingers had tightened on her fork until they went chalk white, and the front of her blouse lifted with her sudden inhalation of a deep breath.

A sly smile twitched Chet's lips. "No such luck," he said, slanting a glance at Molly. "Those flu nurses were mighty hard on the eyesight."

Sylvia Darbie pressed him with no more questions and Molly's grip on the fork relaxed, though she lost nothing of her look of tension. It wasn't hard to guess at something out of the ordinary behind Chet's references to his acquaintance with Molly. That bothered Rock. He neither liked nor trusted Chet and it looked as if Molly felt the same way.

Rock stole a glance at her. But her eyes turned quickly to evade his gaze. Then he saw her stiffen as if shocked. She was staring at Eb Stoddard who sat next to Rock on the right.

AFTER a moment she said quietly, "That silver horse is an awfully nice piece of work."

"Ain't it pretty?" Eb returned, glancing down at the clasp holding the ends of his neckerchief.

"I've been wondering where you got it," she said.

Flattered by her attention, Eb plunged into speech. "I didn't think it was much of a gadget when I first saw it," he declared, "but after I picked it up and cleaned off the dirt, I sure was tickled. Looks just like a spiffy li'l quarter horse, don't it?"

"So you found it?" she asked.

"Yep," Eb assented. "One day not so long ago, when I got through with what I was doing and rode over part of the range I never seen much of. I followed an old road a ways, looked like it ain't used now-a-days. Come to a soft place in the ground and there was tire tracks, showing where an automobile had stopped. Looked like somebody was trying for a short cut across to the ranch and got a puncture. Yessir. I could figger out from them marks in the dirt how two men had got out and changed the tire. I'm observing thataway. That was how I come to see the clasp. It was laying close to a funny-shaped rock, one formed like a heart with a splash of white spang in the center of it."

"That would be an interesting rock formation," Molly remarked. "Is it far from here?"

"Not if you're riding," he told her. "Just go along the lane in the direction of the road

to town and turn to the southeast at that—"

Crash!

A sudden movement of Paul Darbie's arm sent his cup and saucer smashing to the floor while a tall pitcher nearly filled with milk tipped over, flooding the checkered tablecloth. There was a hurried shoving back of chairs to avoid the rivulets of milk trickling from the table and Eb's speech was unfinished.

"Sorry," Paul apologized, "a bug stung me on the wrist." He turned to the cowboys. "If you have all finished, I'd like to see you in my office."

He led the way through the living room to a door at the far side. Crossing this threshold meant entering a place entirely foreign to ranch life. There were steel filing cabinets, a small safe, a flat-topped desk and several substantial chairs. Rock hated the room and it was still more hateful to him to think that it was from this coldly business-like spot that the Hondo Ranch was in future to be managed. Both brothers might inherit equal interests in the property but Paul would dictate the policy and hand out orders.

"We have decided on some changes in the work for this summer," he began, going on to make statements that seemed a bit indefinite to Rock. It was as if they had not been thought out with Paul's usual care, that he had been rushed into making the talk. Paul Darbie wasn't the sort of man to put through a hurried decision.

"I believe that's all," he finally said, "except I'd like to have you check over a few bills with me, Eb. You ordered stuff in town for Mac and he was careless about keeping records."

"When they left the house, Posey exclaimed, "Damn it but I'd like to shove that lunk off a high cliff!"

"Me, too," Pat Flynn agreed emphatically. "Mac should've chased them two birds off the ranch long ago!"

"Kind of hard to do," Posy said. "When their mother was Mac's wife and the old lady was really nice. She ain't been dead but a little while. Maybe he would've run off Paul and Fred if he hadn't got laid up."

"The story goes in Travis that Mac made a will leaving all his property to his wife. They are her heirs, and so—" Pat halted with a curse that expressed his disgust.

"Mac isn't dead yet," Rock put in. "They can only *talk*."

"What if he has a stroke, or loses his mind?" Posy drawled. "I bet they'd get a court order to operate. And just wait until fish-eye Paul can really hand out orders!"

Rock made no further comment but his mood was no more cheerful than that of his companions. "It isn't any skin off our noses," he reflected. "Guess I get so mad because I hate like hell to see the old order pass and something so damned shoddy come in!"

HIS companions went on into the bunkhouse but Rock lingered in the starlight. His thoughts veered to Molly. He liked her. Better than any girl he had ever seen. On this second meeting with her he had sensed that she was seriously troubled. Seemed to be entirely on her own, too. He'd like to help her. If he couldn't do that, at least he could let her know that she had a friend. One not so fresh as that damned, conceited Chet Darbie.

The lighted windows indicated that the family were still in the living room. Rock went on around the house. As he hoped, light still shone brightly through Mac's window, the lower sash of which was raised. He could see the wheel-chair with its blanket-covered occupant. Molly stood near but as if she sensed Rock's approach through the yard, she walked over to the window.

"Molly!" he called softly.

She dropped to her knees and rested her elbows on the sill. "Is that you, Rock?" she half-whispered, and the obscured tone held a welcome.

"That's who," he replied. Since he could not say what was most prominently in his thoughts, he tried to be impersonal. "I'm glad they got you to look after Mac."

"That gossipy hotel clerk told Mrs. Darbie about me," Molly said. "When she asked me to come out here I—well, it seemed a good idea."

Rock asked, "How is the old boy?"

"It's hard to tell," she replied. "He seems to resent me, when he doesn't act dopey. His pulse is surprisingly strong. I've been wondering if a good deal of his condition may not be due to shock. Physically he seems really better than he acts."

"Take good care of him and don't worry," Rock advised. "I think he hasn't been getting any care and that's what he needs."

"Oh!" Molly exclaimed under her breath and as if she were excited. "Go on—tell me

more about what you think of things here."

"I got some funny ideas when I was in the room this morning," Rock returned frankly. "It was the first time I'd seen Mac since immediately after the accident. I was the one who brought him in when he was hurt. In fact I saw the accident from quite a distance—thought he was dead when I got to him."

"I wish he liked me, liked my being here," Molly sighed. "Things would be easier."

"Mac and I always got along fine. I'll drop by in the morning and make it clear to him that you rate a hundred per cent with me," Rock offered.

"That's fine of you," Molly said warmly. "I can't explain now, but—"

"Don't try," Rock said as she halted. "If a friend wants explanations, he isn't much of a friend. Now, isn't there something else I can do?"

"Yes, there is," she replied with the impulsiveness that held such sincerity. "I wish you'd ask Eb Stoddard exactly where he found that silver horse. It really is terribly important."

"That's as good as done," Rock replied. "Anything more?"

"Yes." Molly's face was so close to the window screen that he saw the shine of tears in her eyes and heard the catching of her breath on a suppressed sob. "Look at the back of the clasp, Rock, and see if there are some crudely cut initials. I can't wait to know!"

"I'll look, Molly," he hastened to promise. "And I'll tell you—"

THE night stillness was shattered by a gunshot, then another and another in quick succession.

"What's that?" Molly gasped.

"Going to see!" Rock said, whirling to start around the house with long leaps.

More shots exploded. Then there was a loud thumping of hoofs, calves bawling, voices shouting. Screams came from inside the house. The hoofbeats grew louder, an ominous thundering along the ground, as the stampeding horses raced past the building and off into distance.

"What th' hell!" Rock exclaimed, racing on in the direction from which the explosions of gunfire had come.

"What's going on out there?" Fred Darbie's voice boomed angrily from the ranch house porch.

The boys were yelling as they flung themselves from the bunkhouse, but the shooting had stopped and the hoofbeats were receding.

Sylvia and Sarah were still emitting shrieks when Chet dashed into the yard, shouting, "Those shots came from the corrals!"

Paul and Fred Darbie followed him.

"What th' hell broke loose?" Pat Flynn demanded when he caught up with Rock.

"Not an idea," Rock returned. "Sounded like a regular shoot 'em up gang. And those range mares you boys brought in today broke loose and left country, plenty spooked."

"Eb oughta know what happened," Posy Teal said as he joined them. "He went down towards the pasture while we were smoking outside the bunkhouse."

The calves in one corral were still emitting lusty bawls while other corraled stock milled excitedly in the circle of the stout pole fence.

"Yep, it was that bunch from the pasture," Rock said. "Eb! O-o-oh, Eb!" he shouted with the full force of healthy lungs. Only echo replied.

The Darbies had come up and were batting sharp questions at the cowboys.

"Who did that shooting?" Paul demanded.

"Where was it from?" Fred boomed angrily. "What's going on, anyhow?"

"I dunno," Rock replied, moving towards the opening in the pasture fence, and again shouting, "Eb! Eb!"

Paul and Fred raked the ground and surroundings with flashlights as they followed. But it was Rock who spied the body lying near the fence, before the light beams found it. He sprang forward and stooped for a close look.

"It's Eb," he said.

"Shot?" Posy asked.

"Guess so," Rock replied, a harsh note in his voice. "Anyhow, he's done for," he declared, drawing back the hand he had pressed against Eb's chest.

The Darbies bent down for an examination of the body, Paul's flashlight revealing details.

"Look!" Pat exclaimed, pointing to the bloodsoaked shirt.

"Don't touch him!" Paul ordered. "Not till the sheriff sees him. Chet, drive to town as fast as you can and bring Webb right out, and the coroner, too. I'll go to the house and tell Sylvia what happened. Some of you stay here with the body."

"Poor Eb always went for a walk and a

smoke before he turned in," Posy said gloomily.

"So that's how he happened to be down here," Fred Darbie commented.

"Me and Pat saw him come from Paul's office and head this way," Posy said.

"He must have caught somebody fooling around the corrals or the pasture," Fred remarked.

Rock offered no opinion. He wanted to know more before he made up his mind about the shooting. Things didn't click to suit him. It didn't seem reasonable that anybody would want to steal the mares. And it was early for thieves to be operating, so close to the ranch premises.

He was struggling with another problem. It was now impossible to question Eb regarding the tie clasp. But Rock felt he must make an opportunity to examine it. This seemed a petty matter in comparison with the killing, but Rock was convinced that Molly had a vital reason for her interest. He was in the habit of playing hunches when they were as definite as this and he determined to get possession of the clasp. This could not be done openly yet it must be achieved before the arrival of the officers, who would undoubtedly take the body to town after their examination.

WHILE Rock was debating this problem, Fred complained of the night chill in the air and went to the house for a coat. When he passed beyond hearing, Rock said, "Hold that light, Posy. While he's gone I wanta take a look at Eb."

The three knelt on the ground. Neither spoke for some time. Then Rock exclaimed, "Shot in the back! Damn their souls, whoever did it!"

The cowboys echoed Rock's curse grimly.

"Listen!" he said. "Somebody's coming."

As he hoped, the others sprang to their feet to stare in the direction of the house. He rose more slowly. When he stood beside them, Rock held the silver horse in his hand. As the Darbie brothers drew near, he thrust it into a trousers pocket.

They had not long to wait for the arrival of Chet with the county officers. Hamp Webb stepped first from the automobile to take charge with his usual high-chested importance. The coroner went about his examination in silence.

"We're certainly fortunate to have you to figure out this business, Webb," Paul Darbie said with flattering deference. "We don't need to even think, with Hamp in the saddle, I told Fred."

The sheriff oozed even more importance as he questioned the cowboys. "Looks like you was all too far away to be implicated," he said, "and accordin' to that, 'twasn't nobody on the ranch."

"Then you believe it was some prowler that Eb interfered with," Paul said smoothly. "I agree with you. And what do you find, Doolittle?"

"Shot twice. Once through the chest and once at the top of the spine," the coroner replied. "Either shot would have killed him."

After a short discussion the inquest was set for the following morning at ten o'clock,

Rock's stick caught him a blow

in Travis. The cowboys went to the bunkhouse, but not to turn in until they had argued long and vainly in attempt to arrive at what they considered a satisfactory solution of the shooting.

When Chet returned from his second drive into town that night, the light still burned in his father's office. The living room was deserted of occupants. Entering quietly Chet listened for a moment to the murmur of subdued voices, then removing his boots he crossed noiselessly to the closed door. Pressing an ear against the inner edge of the casing an expression of satisfaction crossed his features when the low mumble resolved itself into distinguishable words.

"Guess that about covers everything," Fred was saying.

"Everything but that damned silver tie clasp," Paul growled. "I saw it shining there on the front of his shirt when we first found him. It was gone when Webb got here."

"Well, what if one of the boys took it?" Fred argued. "I don't see that's anything to get so excited about."

"There is, considering where it came from," Paul insisted. "It's a conspicuous thing. Look how quick that nurse noticed it. What if somebody remembered seeing it on—"

"*You* should have noticed it in the first place, and prevented this happening," Fred said sourly. "You got in too much of a hurry. And when you hurry, you always make a bobble."

"You have to do things quick when you're on a spot," Paul retorted. "And after all,

on the head and he slumped over as Paul turned with a gun in his hand.

there's not a chance in ten thousand anybody would ever connect it with a former owner. If they did, they couldn't find out where it was picked up."

"You're a lot foxier than I am about thinking up schemes, but you've got a blind spot on the brain," Fred sneered. "Everybody at the table tonight heard what Eb said. At the first question about that silver horse, they'll remember."

"Who's getting excited now?" Paul asked.

CHET listened a few seconds longer, then stole away from the door, a calculating glint in his eye. When the two men emerged into the living room, Chet sat on the front steps, boots on and leisurely smoking a cigarette. His father glanced through the front doorway.

"Oh, you're back," he said.

"Yep," Chet assented, adding, "that was pretty smooth, the way you handled Webb and made him think what you wanted him to."

"I didn't want him to think anything but the truth," Paul said sharply.

"Yeah," Chet drawled. "Of course."

Leaning against one of the planed logs that supported the porch roof, Chet continued to smoke and gaze thoughtfully off into the gloom towards the now dark bunkhouse. The summer night breeze was increasing in strength. There was an almost constant rustling of leaves in the cottonwoods in the yard. Occasionally one of the brisker puffs set some small object to careening over the ground. Small noises increased, accompanied by long, whining sighs of the wind. Chet finally got to his feet and went down the steps and away from the house.

Inside, Molly was moving quietly about in Mac's room. She did not believe the outburst of shooting had alarmed him. He had scarcely seemed to notice it. She had felt a decided shock when she learned that the good-natured cowboy had been killed. So short a time since he had been laughing and bantering with his mates, talking across the supper table with her. Molly shivered. Eb knew where the silver horse had lain, in the dust beside a heart-shaped rock. But now he could never tell her.

She approached the wheel-chair. Mac lay with opened eyes that had momentarily lost their dulled look. She was amazed by the brightness of their depths. And at no time had she caught such a look of intelligence. But the eyes also held an expression of acute animosity. This had come when she met his gaze. She could feel the hatred harbored against herself. It amazed her. Could it be that he so deeply resented being helpless?

"Time for a tablet," she said gently, moving the lever that partly lifted the chairback, bringing Mac into a semi-sitting position. Taking the tablet from a box on the medicine stand she extended it. Mac took it with long, gaunt fingers and lifted it to his mouth. Molly held a glass to his lips, he swallowed the water a couple of times, then closed his mouth tightly.

She set the glass back on the table, adjusted the lever and was tucking the blanket closer about his neck and shoulders when a tiny, beadlike object dropped to the floor and rolled under the stand. Molly waited a short time before picking it up; then she moved out of Mac's sight to examine the white globule. It was the tablet she had just handed to the old man.

She gazed at him reflectively. Perhaps that accounted for the look of hatred. He did not want the opiate. Should he be allowed to make such a decision for himself? The doctor no longer made frequent visits to the ranch. Molly had not even seen him. Her directions had come from Sylvia and Paul Darbie. They had insisted that Mac had periods of delirium at night, when the doctor feared he might attempt to get up and sustain further injuries. That he could not rest without the tablets.

Should she take the responsibility of not administering them? Molly recalled the intelligence of his eyes. And the suspicion which had been lurking in the edges of her mind now moved to the foreground. The old man was actually better than the Darbies wanted to think, than they wanted him to be. They were giving him opiates to keep him dulled. Yes, they wanted him to die.

MOLLY had made her decision. Going to the wastebasket she dropped the tablet. Then she adjusted the night light and went into her own room, which opened from Mac's on the right side. The sounds of the rising wind affected her unpleasantly. The sighing and swishing and rustling outside the windows reminded her of living things scurrying furtively about the shadowed yard. She compelled herself to go and look out into the gloom. Tatters of cloud floated across the stars. Everywhere was gloom. It seemed to be closing in on her, the

walls of the room were shrinking inward.

Hastily she drew the window down until the sash was but a few inches above the sill, lowering the shade until it covered the glass. Then she made ready for the night, putting on robe and slippers and brushing her hair until it hung to her shoulders like a veil of finely spun silk.

Making the familiar moves had a steadying effect. Molly stifled a yawn. She was tired. It had been a long, taxing day. Perhaps she would fall asleep and forget for a little while the problems that so constantly gnawed at her mind.

Going to the doorway for a final glance at Mac, she barely suppressed a startled exclamation. He had thrust the blanket back and both arms were lifted high in air. The foot not in a cast moved back and forth, lifting then lowering the knee. His gaunt hands were twisted this way, then that. He rolled his head from side to side.

Molly's thoughts were in a jumble while she stood dazedly watching the contortions of the old man's body. When he lowered his arms, he lifted himself on an elbow, then sat erect. Was he going to try getting up? Molly stepped forward but before she was fairly inside the room, he lay down. It was only to repeat the movement of sitting, then lowering himself several times. After that the gaunt arms went up and down, up and down. Then Mac drew a long, slow sigh and lay still.

"My *goodness!*" Molly exclaimed to herself.

Waiting for a few minutes, she stole softly to his side. His eyes were closed and Mac breathed in a quiet, even rhythm that convinced her he had actually fallen asleep.

"Now, wasn't that something?" she thought as she retreated into her own room. Those were not the movements of a person in delirium. They were inspired by a set purpose, carefully carried out, like a physical exercise. She decided they had been exactly that. He appeared so completely inert, so indifferent to any effort. And on the sly he was trying to keep up his strength, perhaps to spring a surprise on those who were confident of his failing health.

Molly considered this with quickening interest. Why would he do this if he did not believe the deceit necessary? Judging from what she knew of his injuries, he must have been close to death. He had been completely in the power of those who were taking care of him. And Molly now believed that Mac feared them. He feared the appearance of recovery until he gained strength to protect himself.

She shivered with the chill that settled over her. Her father had said that Mac wrote "as if he was afraid of something". He had appealed to his son, who had come in response to that call. And David MacDonald had apparently vanished.

Involuntarily Molly glanced over her shoulder, shrinking from a shadowed corner of the room. Once more its walls seemed to be closing in on her. The whining of the wind had deepened to an eerie moan, and the medley of small sounds suggested the stirring of sinister forces.

Swept by a wave of fear that left her tremulous, Molly hastily set a chair against the door that opened into the living room, bracing its back firmly underneath the door knob. She was turning away when she heard furtive footsteps. She strained her ears. Feet were crossing the floor beyond her threshold with stealthy care, only alert ears would have caught the sounds. Had these steps been taken naturally, with indifference to attracting attention, she would have thought nothing of the incident. The stealth brought recurring waves of apprehension.

On to the staircase and up, went the ghostlike feet. A tread squeaked faintly, then another one nearer the top. The Darbies slept on the upper floor, and no one else. Why should one of the family steal through the house like a thief?

WHEN Molly looked from the window in the morning the early sunlight had obliterated every gloomy shadow. The premises had a cheerful air and looked exactly what they were, the heart of a large and prosperous cattle ranch. Courage returned and she felt ashamed of her near panic of the previous night. Yet she could not take on the cheerfulness of the outdoor world. Not while she held such grave doubts concerning her father.

Mac's eyelids were closed and he seemed to be still sleeping. She doubted this but pretended that she was deceived. Sylvia Darbie had told her that she was to eat breakfast with the family, and much as she wanted a few words with Rock, she thought it unwise to go to the kitchen where the cowboys were.

Rock was a type to inspire confidence and she believed he would manage a meeting with her before the day ended. His manner permitted no doubt of his interest in her and she determined to confide in Rock as soon as she had opportunity.

A knocking on Mac's door announced Paul's entrance. "I see the old man is still asleep," he said, looking at Mac. "Did you give him the tablets?"

"Two of them," Molly replied. "After taking the second one he soon fell asleep."

"How do you think he seems?" There was no lack of concern in Paul's voice.

"We-ell," she replied hesitantly, "I don't know if I should give an opinion, but I felt quite disturbed for a time last night."

"Is that so?" She caught an expression of gratification in Paul's eyes.

Molly watched him closely from between her thick lashes. "Really," she went on, "in my judgment the condition is far from good. I am not surprised that you doubt Mr. MacDonald's recovery. From what I have seen in the short time I have been here, I believe you are justified."

Paul nodded solemnly. "I am very glad that we induced you to come to the ranch," he said. "The responsibility was too much for my wife."

At these words Molly felt one of the chills that came too frequently in Hondo Ranch House. No doubt the Darbies would prefer a professional nurse in charge, if or when death came to old Mac. And she guessed that Paul Darbie considered her too young and inexperienced to suspicion anything underneath the surface.

When he left the room, Mac's eyes opened and she knew he was watching her. Molly smiled when she gave him his orange juice, talking in a friendly manner she hoped would win similar response. But the old cowman was not so easily affected. He appeared to distrust everybody who came in contact with him and to be determined to play a lone hand. Molly could only hope that when she told him her identity, he would accept her as an ally. Since she had not come to the ranch in her own personality, she would not risk a premature disclosure that she was his granddaughter.

"The trail of deceit certainly is a trail to trouble," she thought ruefully. "When I get out of this tangle, just watch me be *honest* Molly MacDonald!"

BREAKFAST was not a pleasant meal. Sylvia Darbie was irritable. "That shooting last night was the last straw," she exclaimed. "I've certainly had enough to bear, with Mac laying helpless on our hands all these weeks. It'll be a relief when we don't have to think about sickness and funerals. The ranch will be all right when it's fixed up modern. I shall make it my own business to see to that. When Mac goes, we're through with old times, and things."

Every one of them looking forward to the time when Mac will be gone, Molly thought indignantly.

Sarah's narrow features wore an expression of personal injury. "I was never at a place where there was a murder," she declared in an aggrieved tone. "With the sheriff comin' in the night to investigate. But he didn't ask me what *I* thought of the shooting and I had ears the same as the rest of you."

"He knows we all heard the shots," Fred told her brusquely. "He isn't interested in statements from anybody who was in the house when the shots were fired."

"I wasn't in the house," she said tartly.

"You weren't?" Paul gave her a sharp look.

"No," she said huffily. "I was settin' in the hammock under the big cottonwood. I heard you an' Eb come out on the porch when he was leavin'. And you asked him to step down to the c'rals and make sure your roan horse was shut in good, that he got loose the last time you wanted to ride him early. When Eb started that way, you went inside. In just a minute somebody came hurryin'

around th' other side of the house and went lickity-cut down the yard. I heard sticks crack when they was stepped on, along that line of bushes. I couldn't figger who 'twould be, running through the yard like that, at *that* time of night."

"A horse, probably," Paul said, "but I'll tell Webb, Sarah." His manner indicated that the sheriff would probably think the information of small value.

The brothers ate in preoccupied silence. Chet Darbie seemed to be enjoying some secret thought, a smile frequently twitching

the corners of his small, full-lipped mouth. Nor did he betray resentment when his attempts to talk to Molly received merely monosyllabic replies. When they got up from the table, Paul and Fred were first to leave the kitchen. Chet followed Molly into the living room.

"Come out on the porch a moment," he said.

"Haven't time," Molly replied, turning towards Mac's room.

Chet swung around to bar her way. "Aw, be a little friendly," he said. "I caught on that you're scared I'll tell what I know about you." He had taken her hand and was urging her towards the outside doorway as he talked.

"I am certainly not scared of anything you can tell about me," Molly assured him with spirit. "But I am tired of all your mysterious hints, when it's all a pretense and we don't know each other at all!" She had let him draw her out on the porch, where she faced him defiantly.

"Oh, Molly, you're so pretty!" he exclaimed fervently. "Don't look at me like that, when I've been so crazy to see you, and carrying your picture around with me for weeks."

"My picture?" Molly gasped.

"Yes," he said, "you are standing beside a horse and smiling straight into the camera, with such a darling, adorable look in your eyes."

She stared at him, pale now and taut. "Where did you get it?" she demanded.

Chet laughed teasingly. "My little secret," he told her. "I will say, though, that stamped on the back of the picture is an address in La Due, Montana, where it was developed and printed."

"You *must* tell me at once," she said. *"Where did you get that picture?"*

Again Chet laughed. "Give me a kiss and I'll tell you where."

THERE were a few seconds of silence. Molly seemed scarcely to breathe, so tense was her pose . Her eyes, not blue now but black, stared into Chet's until he wavered uncomfortably. "Aw, why make such a fuss about it," he said impatiently. "Sometimes we rent cars at the garage, for people to drive themselves around the country. One morning I wanted to use one that had been out the night before and was awfully dirty. The boys were busy, so I cleaned it up. I found that print in the crack between the seat cushion and the back. Probably the fellow pulled a bunch of stuff from his pocket and never noticed he lost the picture."

"Where did he go," Molly said, her lips moving stiffly.

"How should I know?" Chet returned. "Aw, Molly, forget him. I'm here and I'm crazy about you." Seizing her hand he held it fast when she tried to free herself. An arm went around her shoulders. "Molly, listen—" His arm tightened despite her struggles.

"If I were you, I'd stop annoying the lady!" Rock's voice was an angry growl.

"Damn you, Rock!" Chet retorted furiously. "It's none of your business!"

"I make it mine," Rock said, coming close and eyeing Chet grimly.

He released Molly with a disdainful shrug, gave Rock a scornful look and swaggered into the house.

"The damned, insolent pup!" Rock exploded. "One of these days he's going to get his head broken!"

"I'm so glad you came along!" Molly exclaimed.

"I wanted to tell you about the silver horse," he said. "I got it last night and put it in my pocket to bring to you today. This morning, it was gone."

"Gone?" she repeated.

"Can't figure it out," Rock told her. "I know it was in my pants pocket when I turned in. They were on a chair at the foot of my bed. I started to take another look at it, while Pat and Posy were washing, and the horse was gone. I looked all over and it didn't drop on the floor, either."

"How could it be gone?" Molly asked. "Who knew that you had it?"

"Nobody," he replied. "And I don't see how anybody could have seen me looking at it, when I took a peep after we went over to the bunkhouse. Besides, why would anybody want it bad enough to—"

"Did it have initials?" she broke in.

"Sure," Rock told her. " 'D.M.D.' on the back of the clasp."

"It *was* Dad's!"

Molly clasped her hands tightly while she struggled to suppress a long, quivering sob. Rock laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

"Steady," he said, his voice low and firm.

When she spoke the words came like a torrent that has broken all barriers. "Dad

was wearing the silver horse when he came to Travis," she said. "We never heard from him after he left Madison Junction. I can't find out anything about him, but I *know* he wouldn't give that clasp away. And he had to have been on this ranch to lose it here. And there was the picture in the car. He didn't lose things from his pockets like that. That's why I'm so frightened. Oh, Rock, I'm so frightened I can't think!" She was shaking pitifully.

"What brought your father to Travis, Molly?" he asked, his calm manner quieting the panic that had gripped her.

"Mac did," she replied. "D.M.D. stands for David MacDonald, father's name, Mac's son."

"Than Mac's your grandfather!" Rock exclaimed, astounded.

Molly nodded. "The Darbies don't know, nor Mac," she said quickly. "Abbie, mother's friend that I was staying with, thought they were dangerous. She made me promise not to tell who I was. I've made an awful mess of things."

"Maybe not," Rock replied seriously. "But don't try to tell me any more now, somebody might overhear. And listen, don't tell anybody else until we can sort things out a bit." The seriousness of his manner deepened. "Friend Abbie may be right," he said. "We'll get together later on this. Look out, somebody's coming!"

"Molly!" Sylvia called from the living room. "Why aren't you looking after Mr. MacDonald? I went in and found him alone. And you are—"

"Just came out to ask me to do an errand for her," Rock put in easily. "Okay, Molly, I won't forget," he said as he went down the steps into the yard.

"Thanks," she replied.

Sylvia Darbie went on into the kitchen, as Molly entered the house. When she passed the door into Paul's office, she heard him exclaiming angrily. Then Chet's voice came.

"Keep your shirt on," he advised. "I have an idea you'll be tickled to come across with what I want, when I tell you I heard you and Uncle Fred talking in here last night. Your—er—dark secrets made listening of considerable interest."

"The horrid sneak!" Molly thought. "Blackmailing his father. The Darbies are a fine bunch!"

She was glad for the quiet of Mac's room. There was so much to think over. But the outburst to Rock had relieved the strain that had been tightening ever since she set out from Montana. She had a grip on herself. She could keep her thoughts in line now. She wished she had made the situation more clear to Rock, but at least he knew most of the main facts. Having confided in him, Molly lost the suffocating sense of aloneness. And she knew he would help her. He had made that clear by his manner and by the expression in eyes that weren't laughing then, but very, very serious.

IT WAS unfortunate the men had to leave for the inquest almost at once. Rock would have liked to ride out alone and check things over. He had been staggered by Molly's announcement. And incomplete as her statements had been, certain impressions and bits of his own knowledge fitted in with startling aptness, to push him towards conclusions even more astounding than learning that Molly was old Mac's granddaughter and that her father had disappeared.

On the way into town the three cowboys rode in the back seat of the car. Fred drove, with Paul at his side. Chet had taken his roadster and gone ahead. There was little talk and Rock's thoughts were busy trying to weave things into a convincing pattern.

Travis was not a tough town. Not the sort of place you would expect a man to disappear. Had David MacDonald arrived there and revealed his identity to anybody, the knowledge would have gotten about. Had he gone to the Darbie Garage to get a ride out to the ranch? Or had he wired that he was coming and had he been met and prevented from ever reaching the ranch? The telegraph office would have a record of any message.

Rock stared at the backs of the two men he believed had to be responsible if David MacDonald had met with foul play. Strong as was his feeling against them, it was going far to accuse men of being cold-blooded murderers. A fellow didn't naturally think of men who were close associates as being that. Probably this was the reason people were always being surprised when some neighbor was convicted of a major crime.

SOME days before his accident, the old cowman had been in town with Rock. On that occasion Mac had discovered the secret behind the tremendous prosperity of

Darbie Brothers' Garage, something that those who were in the know around Travis were in the habit of ignoring. It was greatly to their advantage to do so, for they were mostly mechanics in the Darbie employ. And, Rock suspected, mostly fellows with some mark against their character, a fact which would be disclosed by their employers if they were not loyal. There was a reason why Darbie Brothers had such excellent buys in used cars, why people came from considerable distances to bargain for one. "Hot" cars of the best makes, properly worked over, brought high prices.

Mac was close mouthed, not one to open up about his private troubles. But learning the undercurrents of the garage business operated by his stepsons had been too much for him.

"Started with my money, blast their souls!" he had burst out. "The first time a dollar of Hondo Ranch money has ever gone crooked!" A few moments later he said, "I wouldn't believe sign that was right under my eyes. I went on puttin' them boys where I thought they'd oughta be. I told myself they wasn't much for backbone, and wouldn't look no further. Guess it ain't far from a weakling to a crook! And it's damned good that I know what I know now."

Then he had asked Rock to drive him to Briscoe the next day. "I'll give out that we're going to look over them horses Blake wants to sell," Mac had said, "and don't you never say no different."

A few days later Mac's accident had occurred. And it had looked as if the Darbies were settled in the saddle at Hondo Ranch, to stay.

"Mac trusted me," Rock thought as they were entering Travis. "That's a second big reason why I've got to stand by Molly. If he sent for his son, Mac wanted him here. He didn't want those crooks taking over his ranch. We've got to find out what happened to David, and do it mighty cautious, not to give away our hand before we're ready. With the sheriff part of the family, sort of, the going ain't going to be helped any. I see myself trying to tell Hamp Webb his sister's husband is a murder suspect!"

The inquest was a routine affair. And the verdict the non-committal one of "death at the hand of an unknown person."

"They didn't prove nothing except that Eb was killed by shots from a forty-five," Pat said disgustedly. "We knew that before."

"What'd you expect?" Posy asked with equal disgust. "One cowboy less in the county don't disturb Hamp Webb. He'll make a pass at investigating, that's all."

"Shut up—here he comes!" Rock growled.

The sheriff accompanied by Paul and Fred Darbie was emerging from the building.

"I know you'll dig up anything that's possible," Paul was saying. "It isn't your fault there's nothing to grab hold of for a start."

"That's right," the officer agreed heartily. "Not a danged clue."

"I hate to give up and let anybody get away with killing a good fellow like Eb," Paul went on, without a shade of expression in his voice or eyes, "but I suppose it was done by somebody that got panicked when he came along. Might have been a drunk with a foggy idea of helping himself to some horses. Started shooting when Eb surprised him."

"Sure, might of," Webb agreed. "I'll make as good a checkup as possible on what was stirring around the country last night."

"Took damned good pains to shoot him in the back!" Rock said grimly. "If I didn't know what a good-natured, easy-going fellow Eb was, I'd think his killing was a personal matter. The extra shooting and stampeding those mares was trimmings, put on for a cover."

"Go to it!" Posy advised. "You've got more brains than the Darbies and that lunk of a sheriff put together."

"I should hope *so*!" Rock exclaimed fervently.

THE cowboys returned to the ranch alone, Paul and Fred Darbie remaining in town. When they were a few miles from the ranch, Rock said, "I'm going to turn and run over here a little ways, over this old road."

"Road, did you say?" Pat grunted as the car bumped and lurched.

"Used to be," Rock returned. He gave strict attention to the driving which became more a trick with every minute. There were no signs that any vehicle had covered the ground within a period of years. And before they had gone two miles they arrived at a spot where a brushy growth completely halted progress.

"Guess that settles it," Rock said, ma-

neuvering to turn. "Nobody came this way last month, and there is no soft ground."

"Ouch! I'll say there isn't!" Posy exclaimed as he was violently bounced from the seat to return with a hard bump.

Rock was thinking of what Eb had said in describing the location of the spot where he had picked up the tie clasp. In riding over the Hondo Ranch he had discovered but three disused roads. The place marked by the soft ground and the heart-shaped rock practically had to be one of those. He did not expect to find marks in the dirt, after so many weeks. But it would be a spot to start from, the one place there seemed any proof that David MacDonald had been, after his arrival in Travis.

If he aided in changing the tire, it was possible the silver horse had been lost at the time. The idea was, where had the car gone from there? Not directly to the Hondo Ranch house, for somebody would have known of David's coming.

While he was concentrating on this lead, starting with the clasp, a piece of the pattern fell in place so suddenly that Rock came near driving off the road into a ditch. Eb had been describing in detail his experience in finding the silver ornament. This had been in the presence of the Darbies and it had been Paul's sudden movement that prevented Eb from revealing the way to reach the spot. Coincidence? Possibly.

"But it's a damn queer coincidence!" Rock exclaimed to himself.

When they arrived at the ranch, he went to the house. There wasn't much chance of getting a word with Molly, with Sylvia Darbie on hand, but Paul had asked Rock to tell Sylvia the result of the inquest. Sarah met him at the kitchen door.

"Well, did Paul tell th' sheriff what I told him to?" she demanded.

"Why, I don't know," Rock replied. "Probably did, if you sent Webb a message."

"Probably didn't!" she snapped. "Paul made light of what I heard last night, when I told him. Made out like it was a horse. Hunnh! Don't you s'pose I know the difference between a horse stompin' his hoofs along, and a man that's runnin'?"

"Sure you do, Sarah," Rock said diplomatically. "What did you hear, tell me?"

Gratified, she responded in detail. "You'd make a fine witness," he assured her. "Too bad you weren't there to tell the coroner. You make the whole setup clear, even little things, like Paul asking Eb to take a look for his horse."

"I've got a good memory," she said. "I heard that, all right, and I've been thinkin' that's the way little things cause trouble. If Paul hadn't said that, like enough Eb wouldn't have gone walkin' down there, and he'd of been alive now."

"Yes, like enough he would," Rock agreed, thoughtfully.

Before going to the corrals, he walked around the house. As he remembered, there were two windows opening into Paul's office. From either of these it would have been no trick at all for a man to drop to the ground, run unseen through the gloom of a moonless night, especially with the cover of those bushes Sarah mentioned, and reach a spot near the corrals and pasture entrance. If he had vital reason to hurry, he could get back into the house in the same manner, within a a very short space of time. Soon enough to emerge with other members of the family who came outside, drawn by gunshots.

When Rock joined the other cowboys he asked, "Hear anything last night, like somebody stirring around in the cabin?"

Posy shook his head. "When I hit the hay," he replied, "I never heard nothing till you yelled at me this morning."

"The damned wind woke me," Pat said. "Guess I wasn't sleeping so hard. I got that idea, too, that somebody was in the house. Heard something rattle, but I knew right away it was my belt buckle hitting the chair. The wind sure tore through that end window—blew my stuff down."

Rock made no comment. But he was thinking that anybody who knew the silver horse was missing from Eb's tie would suspect one of the cowboys as having removed it. And if possession of the clasp was of vital importance, that person might even venture a search in the bunkhouse, particularly on a night when the wind kicked up noise enough to cover any small sounds.

It was all guesswork, he knew. There must be something more definite to hitch up his story before he went to any authority with accusations.

HE MANAGED to stay around the premises that afternoon, working on some young stock that was being broken to the saddle. He hadn't had a glimpse

of Molly, and decided against trying to see her when Sylvia was hanging around the living room.

The shadows were lengthening when Chet drove in at the wheel of a new roadster that was a-glitter with chromium decorations. His mother appeared on the porch.

"Chet!" she cried. "Your father *did* let you have that Packard. I thought he set his foot down that you absolutely could not have a new car this summer."

Chet laughed. "He changed his mind. I made a ilttle deal with him, and got the car for value received, you might say. Wanta take a little ride, to try her out?"

"Yes indeed!" she replied. "I've been shut in here until I'm going crazy. Now we've got that nurse, I'm going to go to town, days. I sent word to Helen Loring that I'd be in for the bridge games from now on. There's one tomorrow—and I've got to have my hair set."

The car had scarcely whirled away before Rock was striding towards the house. The kitchen door into the living room was closed and he could hear Sarah singing, off key as usual, but making noise enough to cover what he was doing.

A light tap on Mac's door brought Molly. A smile wavered around her lips when she saw Rock, and there was relief in her eyes. Stepping outside, she drew the door almost shut behind her.

"Have to talk fast," Rock said. "Sylvia and Chet won't be gone long. My ideas are pretty black, but this is that kind of business."

"They won't shock me," Molly assured him. "Nothing could be worse than the things I've feared, the things I think when I'm alone!"

He took her hand, holding it with a firm, reassuring clasp while he talked, telling her what he had figured out and how he had followed the old road in search of the heart-shaped rock. "What'd you say about a car and a picture, this morning?" he asked. "I didn't get that clearly."

Molly explained, repeating what Chet had told her.

Rock scowled. "You mean that—that sneak has got your picture?" he stormed. "That he has the damned gall to carry it around?"

She nodded. "That was how he recognized me," she replied, "and knew my first name. It was written on the back. I gave that print to Dad the day he started down here."

"Well, that—that swine is going to give it back!" Rock declared grimly.

"I can't make a fuss about it now," she said, "without starting something that maybe I won't want to, since we've decided I'm to keep quiet about everything until we have a chance to find out some more."

Rock was still looking furious, but he changed the subject. "If we only knew what your father did when he left the train," he said.

"I believe one of the Darbies met him," Molly told him. "Dad wrote Mac that he was coming. Fred gets the ranch mail every day. He opened the letter."

"He was met and taken away in the garage car," Rick exclaimed. "Taken into the country, to that lonely place—" he broke off, giving Molly an apologetic look.

"And—killed," she whispered. "Don't think I haven't pictured that."

"Poor little girl," Rock murmured, tightening his hold on her hand.

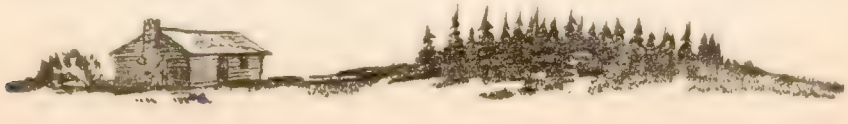
"Don't worry for me," she said, almost fiercely. "I can't lose my nerve. You've got to make me brace up, like you did this morning."

"That's right," he agreed. "Chin up, Molly, and at 'em! I'm going to locate that road. From what Eb said, it has to be on the range that's part of the land your grandmother owned when she married Mac. She deeded it to him. It lies on the other side of Hondo Creek and the old log house still stands, a two-room cabin, though it hasn't been used for years. I believe your grandmother was born there."

"Dad told us about that," Molly said. "He used to ride over there when he was a boy. There's a short, box canyon that comes in fairly near the place. That isn't awfully high country, just the beginning."

"You're right," Rock agreed. "It's awfully pretty over there. A nice ride for you to take some day, when you get a couple of hours or so out of that room."

Molly smiled wistfully. "It would be wonderful to ride, and look off over this lovely



open country, at the mountains. Without—having this horrible burden to carry with you."

"We'll clear that up, Molly," Rock said. "And we *will* ride over there some day. I've always thought I'd like to go there, with just the right kind of companion—" He checked himself abruptly as there came a break in Sarah's singing. "When I find the road, and that heart-shaped rock, maybe there will be something to follow from there to get—"

"Real evidence," Molly put in. "Maybe that was where—well, perhaps Dad didn't know what was happening to him after they stopped to fix the tire." Catching a tremulous lower lip between her teeth, she freed her hand and turned back to Mac's door as Sarah came from the kitchen.

She beamed at Rock. He was high in her regard since his sympathetic listening to her confidences a short time before.

"She hadn't oughta be cooped up in that room all the time," Sarah declared. "I'll take her place for awhile tomorrow, after eatin's over at noon. You take Molly for a ride."

"Good idea," Rock said emphatically. "Count on that, Molly."

"Would it be too far to go over by the old cabin?" she asked.

"Not a bit," he replied. "We will."

SUPPER that evening was an even more gloomy meal than breakfast had been in the morning, and again Chet Darbie alone, of those around the table, had a tendency to smile. He had given Rock a glowering look when the cowboys entered, then ignored him. When Sarah brought a big bowl of beefsteak gravy from the stove, she set it down with a thump, giving emphasis to the question she shot at Paul Darbie.

"What did the sheriff say when you gave him my message?"

"Y-your message?" Taken by surprise, Paul hesitated.

"Humph! You didn't think it amounted to anything," she snapped, "so you kept mum. Well, when I told Rock about what I heard, *he* thought it was important enough so I should have been taken in to the inquest. He said I'd make a fine witness!"

Paul's jaw muscles quivered but the expression of his eyes remained the same, cold and blank. "I presume Rock is a judge," he said icily. "When Webb wants your testimony, he'll get it. And it proves nothing beyond the possibility that an outsider may have been prowling around the yard. No clue to the identity of whoever did the shooting."

Sarah returned to the stove with a scornful sniff.

Sylvia's fleshy features took on a martyred expression. "Please," she implored, "let's forget all that miserable business. It doesn't really have anything to do with us."

Both Posy Teal and Pat Flynn gave her glowering looks, but the words that leaped to their lips were suppressed when Rock nudged them sharply with his bootheels.

Molly ate in silence and left the kitchen at once when she finished. With the sort of thoughts she held about the Darbies, it was not easy to sit at the table with them. Only the intensity of her purpose made it possible to go on without betraying her identity.

None of the family came in that evening and she was glad. When she went to the kitchen to fill a thermos jug with fresh water for the night, the living room was deserted and Sarah was going into her room. She halted as Molly appeared. Sarah liked the young girl for Molly treated her with consideration and had asked no favors.

"Does Mac talk any?" she asked.

"He scarcely speaks," Molly replied.

"That's th' way he's acted every time I've been in there," Sarah said. "He ain't scarcely moved since right after the accident, and I guess he overdone it then. Joe was watchin' the old feller and he helped Mac to part sit up to write a letter. He was scairt afterwards 'cause Mac had kind of a faintin' spell, so he never told nobody but me. And I kep' still! They're so fussy about keepin' Mac quiet."

"Who do you suppose he wrote to?" Molly asked, trying to conceal her keen interest.

"I dunno. Joe can't read," Sarah replied. "I don't guess Mac has any folks now. I did hear he had a son, but Sylvie said both him and his wife died, some place up in Canada."

"Oh," Molly exclaimed softly.

"It's kinda too bad," Sarah lowered her voice. "Mac set such store by this place, he'd hate what the Darbies'll do to it." Sarah's narrow face was aglow with gratification at having an attentive listener. "Between you and me, Molly, they ain't so awful much. They was always devilin' the old man to invest money in something. They make a lot, I s'pose, but they do it sort of schemin', if you get my meanin'. Paul nor Fred won't get out and really work for a dime. And Chet!

All that feller is good for is fixin' himself up pretty and makin' a hit with the girls!"

"You are very observant," Molly complimented the cook. "But," she managed a weak smile, "Chet doesn't make a hit with *all* the girls!"

Sarah laughed outright. "I seen you don't like him," she said. "But that Rock's a swell feller, none better. You just size him up when you go ridin' tomorrow, and see if he ain't the kind for a girl to tie to."

MOLLY made no comment at this, but her heart was singing as she went back to Mac's room.

She wheeled Mac's couch chair into a better position for the night. Then she said, watching him closely as she spoke, "I'm going to skip giving you the sleeping tablets. Would you like a drink of fresh water?"

He nodded. His eyes weren't dull now, but they still harbored distrust.

Pouring water from the jug, she took it to him. Mac drank slowly, then he said, "A trick. Now you'll tell them I had a bad night and I'll be given stronger medicine to keep me quiet."

She shook her head, caught and held his gaze, then said slowly, "*You* tried to play a trick on *me* last night. You only pretended to take the tablets." His eyelids fluttered but he said nothing. "You had no opiate, yet you were quiet and slept," Molly went on. "I'm taking the responsibility of not giving you the medicine unless you ask for it."

Again he was silent, still wary. Probably his mind did not work with its former clarity, she thought, and something had given him such tremendous fear, that his judgment was completely warped.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to be give dope," she said in a pleasantly conversational tone. "And I think you've recovered sufficiently so you should make the choice for yourself."

"Thank you, Miss," he surprised her by saying. His voice was weak but there was more life in the tone than he had previously exhibited.

Molly was sorely tempted to tell him at once who she was. But the experiences of recent days had taught her a new self control, and she did not follow the impulse. Should she announce her identity, she would be obliged to tell him more, and he might not have strength for such disclosures. He might even become so excited that the family would be aroused.

She merely smiled and said, "I'm glad you are pleased. Now I'm going to my room. I'm very sleepy. But I'll awaken instantly, if you touch the bell. Good night, Mr. MacDonald."

"G'night," he replied.

"Let him do setting up exercises," she thought as she made ready for the night.

What a fight he was putting up. Crippled, old, weakened by the accident, afraid to betray the little strength he had, Mac was battling stoutly. Tears stung Molly's eyelids. She had given up hope that her father was still alive. That made her more anxious for Mac's recovery. But with Rock in the picture, everything seemed vastly different from what it had been when she was groping her way alone. She felt Rock's nearness even when she could not see him. He gave her courage to march ahead, he would be at her side if she needed him. Yet he had made no particular protests. It was not the words that gave her this feeling about Rock. He was that sort. A friend would always know that Rock's loyalty was unswerving.

WHEN Molly started for the kitchen the next morning, in response to Sarah's ringing of the breakfast bell, Paul and Fred Darbie were in the living room. They were talking so intently they did not notice her.

"Well, what shall I tell Livingstone when he phones?" Fred asked. "If we go into that deal, it means ten thousand on the nail."

"No dice," Paul said.

"Oh, you could dig that up," Fred protested. "That's too good a chance to lose."

"You've been saying that about things until we've taken on everything we can," Paul said crustily. "We've gone too fast."

"You mean," Fred sneered, "*you've* gone too slow, finishing that deal you promised."

Molly had reached the kitchen but she could still hear them.

"That's about wound up," Paul said. "If you could stave Livingstone off for two weeks, it will be."

"Two weeks," Fred repeated. "Maybe. But, how long will it take after—" He left the sentence in mid-air.

"Not long. Thibaut will fix it so we can handle ourselves pretty quick," Paul declared, leading the way to the breakfast table.

The two men had not spoken excitedly yet

Molly sensed something beneath the surface. Fred's heavy-chinned face had a taut expression. Paul's mouth and jaw had a granite set. Looking at them made her want to shiver.

Later, when she was beating an egg into some milk for Mac, Molly asked Sarah, "Do you know of a man named Thibaut?"

"Should say I do," the cook replied. "He's a lawyer in Travis. Used to do business for Mac. But he ditched Corson Thibaut. Mac said most lawyers was half crook but Thibaut was three-fourths and it was that extra fourth Mac couldn't swaller."

"But he's a friend of the Darbies?" Molly asked.

"Dunno," Sarah replied. "They'd make friends with the old Nick if they thought they could scheme a dollar into their pockets without workin'. And then they'd say that was business."

"I thought the Darbies were so important around here," Molly commented.

"They be," Sarah told her. "Sylvie mixes into all the women doings in town and the men folks are in the kind of places that most folks sort of kow-tow to 'em. I guess you could say the Darbies put up a big front."

"I see," Molly said thoughtfully.

Sylvia Darbie rode into town with the two men but Chet lingered on the ranch. He waylaid Molly as she came from the kitchen. "Aw, you're not still mad at me, are you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said frankly. "And I want that picture. You had no right to it."

"I'm keeping it, just the same," he told her, with the smile she loathed.

"That," Molly declared, her eyes blazing with scorn, "is the same as stealing."

Whisking into Mac's room, she closed the door firmly in Chet's face.

She heard him slam the screen door and stamp angrily across the porch to the steps. A moment later he backed his roadster under the shade of a big tree and lifted the hood. He was fussing with the engine when Rock rode in from the creek.

"If you're looking for Molly," Chet greeted the cowpuncher sneeringly, "she isn't hired to visit with the cowpunchers."

Rock was off his horse like a shot, standing over Chet.

"Repeat that!" he ordered sharply.

"I don't take orders from you," Chet retorted.

"You do this morning." Rock's voice was grim. "Here's another, and don't try to sidestep it. Give me that picture of Molly Vance."

"Swell chance," Chet drawled, turning back to the engine and pretending to ignore Rock.

Rock's hand shot out to grab Chet's collar at the back and jerk him erect. "I said, give me the picture and I mean it!"

"I won't!" Chet yelled shrilly. "Lemme go, you damned ape!"

For answer, Rock shook him, then slapped his face, before Chet got a fist working.

"I'm not asking for that picture now," Rock said. "I'm taking it!"

With that he deftly reversed Chet's body until he hung head down, Rock gripped his ankles, and shook Chet until the contents of his pockets fell to the grass. A knife, keys, cigarettes and lighter, a pencil, a billfold and some letters, the print of Molly's pictured face among them.

Flinging Chet away, Rock stooped to grasp the picture. As his fingers closed about the print, his gaze was held by a bright object lying with the keys. His hand darted out, caught it up so quickly Chet had not yet opened his eyes, and thrust it in a pocket.

Molly, watching from the window, wanted to call out to him. But she kept silent, as he walked over to his horse, sprang into the saddle and went loping to the corrals.

The entire incident had not taken more than five minutes. Yet it seemed a real event. Molly's pulses hammered fast with excitement. Rock had gotten her picture. And he had administered a whipping to Chet that must have hurt his pride far more than his body. He was sitting up now, feeling of his face. Then he gave a quick glance around and got to his feet. Soberly, Molly drew back from the window as she hastened around the house. Chet would never forgive Rock.

"I don't care what happens, I'm glad Rock did it!" she exclaimed aloud.

"Did what?" Mac's voice startled her.

"Whipped Chet Darbie," she replied. She described briefly what had happened, without mentioning the picture.

"Good boy," the old man said, a faint color glowing in his gaunt face. "Chet's needed a good lickin' for more than twenty years!"

Molly could entice Mac into no further speech but a faint smile hovered about his lips as he lay with closed eyes and she felt she was making progress. He was forgetting to hold so tightly to his mask in her presence and while he still was in a dangerously weakened condition, he was of naturally tough fiber and as long as he had the will to recover, that was possible. It would be easier, however, to snap the slender thread of his life, and thinking of that stirred all Molly's instinctive fear of the Darbies.

Chet came into the house and raced up the stairs, and she could hear him angrily slamming around his room. It was easy to picture his rage and she knew that weak nature in the grip of such fury of resentment had dangerous possibilities. It was something of a relief when he turned outdoors, flung himself into the roadster and drove off in the direction of town in a very tornado of speed.

CHET DARBIE was in a frenzy of rage. No girl had ever seemed to him to be so desirous as Molly. Her repeated rebuffs had merely added incentive to his efforts and when Rock stepped into the picture, jealousy of the cowboy kindled to a flame that leaped higher every time he thought of Molly. She flouted Chet disdainfully. At first

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STARS OVER CANYADA

A Novel of the Far West's Youth

By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

he hadn't believed any girl could hold such an attitude towards him. That morning he read in her eyes a loathing that made him wild with the desire for revenge. That she was still desirable added to the heat of the flame consuming him.

He knew she had been in Mac's window, watching while Rock administered the beating which was the deepest humiliation Chet could imagine. Chet's face was an ugly mask of hatred as he sent the roadster hurtling towards town. Through the streets he tore, around a corner on two wheels, and skidded to a stop in front of the garage with a loud shriek of the brakes.

"Dad here?" he demanded of a mechanic.

"Just coming," the fellow replied, glancing along the street. "He and Fred went over to the bank." He would have prolonged speech further, while he eyed Chet's face with interest, had not Chet flung himself around with a mutttered curse, to go leaping up the steps into the private office.

He strode impatiently about the empty room, then came to a sudden halt in front of the desk. Jerking open the top drawer his fingers had closed around the butt of a thirty-eight revolver, when the door opened.

"What are you doing with that?" Fred Darbie demanded, entering with Paul at his heels.

"Borrowing it," Chet said, thrusting the weapon into his belt.

"Oh no, you're not!" Paul declared, appraising his son sharply. "What's the matter?"

"Matter enough!" Chet growled sullenly. "Do you think I'm going to take a beating like a dog, and not do anything about it?"

"You're not going out of here in that mood, carrying a gun," Paul insisted grimly. "Who beat you up, and why?"

"That damned Rock!" Chet shouted, his fury breaking all bonds. "He jumped me in the yard, didn't give me a chance; just grabbed me and knocked me around till I was so blind I couldn't see."

"That doesn't sound like Rock," Fred said. "I don't like the fellow, but he's on the square. What did you do?"

"Do? Not a thing!" Chet's voice rose shrilly. "I was tinkering the car engine. He jumped off his horse and grabbed me. He was mad because I had Molly's picture. He beat me till I lost my senses, grabbed the picture outa my pocket and lit out. I'll show him, and her, too! There's something funny about her. Why'd she get so scairt when she found I knew she come from La Due, Montana, and knew her name? She stopped like she was shot and turned white as a sheet when I told her I knew her."

"La Due," Fred repeated, exchanging a glance with his brother.

"What is all this?" Paul demanded. "Let's get to the bottom of it, and stop shouting!" Stepping forward, he gripped his son's right arm with one hand, while he jerked the gun from Chet's belt with the other. "Come, out with it!"

Paul and Fred Darbie listened in scowling silence to Chet's account of finding the picture. When he concluded, Paul said, "She was startled to find that a stranger knew so much about her. You've acted like a stupid fool. Molly Vance isn't the sort of girl who thinks it's cute when a fellow is impudent. And I don't think Rock jumped you without warning, either!"

Chet glared at his father from bloodshot eyes. "Maybe you wouldn't stand up for him so quick if you knew all *I* do about him!" he exclaimed sullenly. "It was him took that silver horse you was so upset about the other night, and I'm betting he didn't take it just because he thought it was a pretty ornament."

"How do you know Rock has it?" Paul asked in a restrained tone.

"Because I got it out of his pants pocket," Chet declared boastfully. "That windy night, after I heard you and Fred blowing off about how scared *you* were. I sneaked around the bunkhouse a bit, and found it. Handy to have something like that to cash in on, when you get in a tight mood."

"Give it to me!" Paul ordered, tight-lipped.

Chet looked at him for a moment, shrugged his shoulders and yielded. A hand went into his pocket, keys jingling as he drew out a mixture of small articles. Scowling, he pawed these over, searched other pockets, then cursed fluently. "He got it when he took the picture!" he exclaimed.

Argument in the office was fast and furious. Finally Paul said, "Go home and pack some stuff. I'll stake you to a three months' trip, any place you want to go. When you come back, we'll forget all this business."

"Wanta get rid of me," Chet sneered. "Well, I ain't going. You can't get rid of me while you clean up. Think I don't know what you're

up to? You're not so slick. If you were, you'd have covered yourselves better. I won't snitch. But this is a family affair, get that!" He lowered his voice almost to a whisper, while the two men eyed him in white-lipped tensity. "When you probate old Mac's will, the one Thibaut has in his safe that leaves *everything* to his second wife, your mother, count me in on some of the velvet. Just figure she has *three* direct heirs, instead of two!"

When Chet left the office a few minutes later, Paul and Fred were staring at each other and the revolver was slipped unnoticed from the desk under Chet's leather jacket. As the door closed, Paul wiped drops of icy perspiration from his forehead.

"My God!" he exclaimed under his breath.

"Yes," Fred said, "and you so smart with your schemes that 'can't fail'. Damn it! Look at the clues you scattered around! Even a dumb cowpuncher like Eb Stoddard finds one. Why did Rock grab onto that tie clasp? He's no fool. There's something behind it!"

"We'll take care of Rock, if we have to," Paul said. "If he suspects anything, he hasn't spilled it yet, I'm sure. And don't get so damned independent. You're in this, too. You met the car out there that night, and it would be your word against mine, who actually hit Dave over the head. *You* helped dig—"

"Shut up!" Fred snarled. "And get busy figuring what we're going to do about Rock. Then we're going to finish this business up!"

NOBODY but Rock showed up at the ranch to eat at noon. Posy and Pat were too far out on the range and none of the Darbies returned from town.

"Going for that ride this afternoon?" Rock asked Molly.

Sarah answered for her. "Yes indeedy, she is. As soon's I wash up the dishes, I'll set in the living room where I can keep an eye on Mac."

"It's lucky I brought a riding outfit," Molly thought as she went back to Mac's room. Before she dressed, she explained to her patient. He listened with such an unusual show of interest that Molly's self restraint crashed. "Rock asked me where I'd like to ride," she said, "and I told him over to the old cabin, across Hondo Creek, where my grandmother was born."

The pupils of old Mac's eyes dilated slowly. "What did you say?" he asked, looking at her with a keenness that was disconcerting.

She repeated the last sentence, adding with haste, "I am really Molly Vance MacDonald. Your son David was my father."

"My son had no children," Mac said.

"He never wrote you about me," Molly explained gently. "But he was going to tell you that he felt differently now, not hurt and angry like he used to be."

"Tell me, when?" Mac asked in the voice that grew sharper with every word he uttered. And the old enmity was deepening in his eyes.

"When he got here, only he didn't," Molly replied confusedly, aware that she had impulsively plunged into disclosures she had meant to make with such care.

"Stop lying!" Mac ordered.

"I'm not," Molly denied. "I can prove—"

"I don't doubt it!" Mac broke in. "You're an impostor. Go and tell your Darbie boss that I wasn't fooled for a minute. I gave you rope, and now you're hanging yourself."

"Listen," Molly implored him. "They don't know who I am. I'm afraid of them, like you are. They—"

"Who says I'm afraid of them?" Mac broke in angrily. "Shut up, now, and leave me alone. I don't believe a word you tell me! I won't listen!"

"You will listen to this!" Molly exclaimed in desperation. "David was my father. I believe he was killed while he was on his way to Hondo Ranch, after you wrote him to come. I don't care if you are old, and my grandfather, you can't tell me a lie and make me take it! I was sorry for you, but I'm not any more. You let the Darbies drive my father from his home and now you play right into their hands again. I'm not going to run away. I shall stay and fight till I find out what happened to Dad!"

Molly whirled and darted away. When she reappeared, dressed in her riding clothes, she marched through Mac's room with her head high and bright red spots burning in the center of her cheeks. Sarah met her at the door.

"Rock's outside with the horses," she said, looking admiringly at Molly. "Run along. You look as pretty as a rose."

WHEN Rock had listened to Molly's account of her recent interview with Mac he said, "Just as well you told him. The old boy will mull it over but he won't peep to any of the family. You'll have to break into the open very soon, anyhow."

He told her of finding the silver horse in the jumble of things that fell from Chet Darbie's pockets. Then he gave it to her.

"O-o-oh!" Molly murmured, cuddling it in her hand and then pressing it against her cheek.

"I never suspected Chet," Rock said. "But you have enough now to interest the District Attorney. We won't bother Webb."

A few minutes later Rock called her attention to the turn-off. "We're heading southeast, the direction Eb said to turn, and this trail will take us into the old road from the main highway to the cabin. We'll look along there for the heart-shaped rock."

Molly frequently lapsed into a silence that Rock did not break. But when they entered the stretch of long-unused road, he watched closely on each side of the way. The soil, without rain for weeks, gave off clouds of dust as the hoofs stirred it. Recent winds had swept the dried earth so smooth that they could detect no traces of tire marks. They were in sight of the pole bridge across the stream when Molly cried excitedly, "Look! See that kind of flat boulder, with the white splash across its center?"

"That's it," he replied. "I'm sure of it. But there isn't a chance in a million of finding anything here after all this time."

Molly nodded sorrowfully. She glanced around, then said, "Let's ride on to the cabin. Nobody could move those boulders to hide anything. If Dad was here he—he was taken away."

To divert her thoughts Rock commenced telling her all he knew of the cabin. "It hasn't been lived in for years," he said, "but Mac kept it in shape. There are good heavy doors and planks nailed over all the windows."

Presently they came in sight of the two-room log cabin. It was some distance from Hondo Creek, almost in the mouth of the short canyon from which a smaller stream meandered into the Hondo.

"Maybe we can ride up there later," he suggested. "There's a pretty little waterfall at the upper end."

When they had dismounted near a coppice of trees and bushes, Molly went on to the house while Rock tied their horses. Dried tumbleweeds and broken brush had blown in underneath the low roof of the wide porch. But the trash had been shoved back from the door, a fact Rock noted at once, as he had other signs that the place had been visited not so long ago. He said nothing to Molly but when he lifted a heavy bar and pulled the dood open, he stepped in ahead of her to give a quick glance over the oblong room. It was empty, though the beams from a flashlight revealed a number of tracks through the accumulated floor dust to the inner doorway. The marks were rather blurred but it was plain that some were made by boots, others by shoes. Not many men who would be around there wore shoes. Fred did, but that didn't prove anything, Rock reflected.

While Molly was examining the unusual stonework of the big fireplace Rock stepped back on the porch. "Thought I heard a car on the other side of the creek," he said, "but guess I was mistaken."

When they entered the further room, which received no outside illumination, Rock again led the way, sweeping the beam from the flashlight from corner to corner. His eyes narrowed as they noted a spot where the floor boards were practically free from dust, and they were not lying quite as flat as their neighbors. It was a place about three feet wide, near the far wall, a section beneath which a grave might have been dug.

SEVERAL pairs of antlers were fastened to the walls and there were numerous shelves, as well as another fireplace. Against the center of the rear wall was an open front cupboard with shelves to a height of nearly six feet. While Molly was looking at the few articles on these shelves. Rock walked over and took a closer squint at the dust-free bit of floor. The accumulated dust had been shaken from the cracks and he could not doubt that section had been raised at some recent time. But he did not call Molly's attention to this. He would not tell her of his suspicion unless later investigation proved it to be true.

"Do you suppose you could take down that tiny pair of antlers?" she asked, gazing at the trophy of some long bygone hunt that was fastened above the cuboard.

"Sure," he replied. "Stand there at the side and throw the flash on them. I can climb on one of the shelves and reach them."

"Careful," she warned.

"This cupboard is as strong and heavy as iron," he declared. "It would hold up an elephant."

"But it could fall," Molly said as the top tilted slightly forward.

The fingers of one hand clung to the top while Rock reached up to the antlers with the other, when a shot came hissing from the outside doorway to catch Rock in the arm that held him balanced.

He toppled backwards as two more bullets tore in. Molly's suddenly rigid finger pressed the button and the light went off as the shelves crashed to the floor with Rock. A corner of the cupboard struck her shoulder and a metal candlestick slid heavily from its place and gave her a knock on the head.

Following the explosion of the gunshots and the crashing in the cabin an oppressive silence fell. There was no stirring of the body pinned down by the shelves. Molly lay at one side, beyond the strip of dim light entering through the inner door. She was as motionless as Rock. The only sounds in the cabin were the tiny stirrings of loosened dirt particles, or the panicked retreat of a beetle.

A stealthy step sounded on the porch. It did not advance into the cabin. And presently it stole away. Later a motor hummed faintly across Hondo Creek. Then its usual quiet fell over the old place.

The shadows had lengthened by a full half hour when Molly came to. When she opened her eyes at first she believed herself to be in total darkness. She felt the floor plank under her cheek and turned, trying to lift herself on an elbow. Just beyond her fingertips she glimpsed a hand. It lay within the band of dim light that also revealed to her the prone cupboard.

Molly blinked dully. Nothing made sense. Her gaze moved a little farther. Then she saw a head covered with thick dark hair. It was beyond the hand. And the hand belonged to Rock!

That comprehension brought consciousness. She sat up, pain racking her head, and struggled to control the surge of dizziness that came with her quick move.

Had she lain there long, she wondered, and what of Rock?

Scrambling over beside him, she took hold of his hand, calling his name softly. At once she knew it was the hand of a living man but he was insensible, probably seriously hurt.

She had a feeling that she had been lying on the floor for some time. The man who fired the shots must have peered in, seen Rock lying beneath the fallen cupboard as if dead, and gone away. If he came back, he wouldn't shoot her, she reasoned. Men didn't go around shooting girls.

She groped for the flashlight. It wasn't far away but the bulb had been shattered by the fall and it was useless. Still calling his name, Molly touched Rock's face and then felt his pulse. There was a steady, if slow, beating. Her own blood moved more swiftly and her perceptions stepped up. Now Molly made quick, sure moves. The shelves had fallen across Rock's body on a slant. He might have a broken leg, but she thought something kept them from resting on him with full weight. First of all she must free his body.

IF SHE managed to lift the cupboard, she could not at the same time pull him from beneath it. Molly was sure she couldn't move it away from the spot where it had fallen. The only course left was to find something she could work under the edge, and then a thicker object, and raise the shelves by degrees. Outside there might be some flat stones. They would be firm supports.

Before going for them, Molly examined Rock as well as she could, tears half blinding her and falling on his face as she stooped to place her cheek against his. It was then that she felt the moisture under his left arm. He was wounded. That sleeve was saturated with blood.

She started for the door on the run. She must lift the cupboard as fast as she could and free him. Her racing feet were on the porch when she halted, stricken with sudden terror. A car was coming along the road that she and Rock had taken to the cabin. She shrank back inside the doorway. The gunman might be returning. Perhaps if he saw Rock still lying on the floor, he would go away. She wouldn't show herself at once.

Remembering that she had seen the leg of an old kitchen table lying in a corner, Molly grabbed it up and went back to peep from the doorway. The car was coming closer. When it crossed the bridge the road turned just enough so the occupants wouldn't be facing the cabin for a moment. She must snatch a glimpse then.

She waited with wildly beating heart, every nerve strained. Peering fearfully around the door jamb, she saw the dark blue car make the swing on the near side of the creek. The automobile was perfectly familiar to her. She had ridden in it from Travis to the ranch, and in the front seat now were Paul and Fred.

Intuition told her no ordinary purpose brought them there. She tried to steady herself. Surely they wouldn't harm her, but what about Rock? She swayed dizzily. Pains were shooting through Molly's head and she was sure of nothing beyond the fact that she was desperately afraid of the Darbies.

She ran back to the inner room and crouched beside the still unconscious Rock. He had told her to be brave. That meant she should face the two men without betraying fear. They would not dare do anything but help her rescue Rock.

Clasping her hands together, she struggled for control of the tremors that rippled through her body. The car was stopping. Molly heard their voices. She was getting slowly to her feet and when Fred said, his booming voice harsh and frightening, "There's his horse. He was dead all right or he'd have managed to light out of here."

"Look! There he is on the floor, just as Chet left him!" Paul's voice was nearer.

Molly froze, a knee and one foot on the floor in the position she had started to rise. Her mouth went dry and her throat felt paralyzed. She couldn't call out. They wanted Rock dead. They were murderers.

"Keep out of there!" Fred growled. "If I had been sure Chet was telling the truth, we wouldn't have come near this place. He talked so crazy when we met him. I told you to keep *out*. I'm running this business and I'm going to make sure there aren't any clues left *this* time, for some dumb cowpuncher to spread around."

Molly's rigid figure and white face were just beyond the strip of light from the inner door. She clutched the table leg, gathering some courage from the feel of the weapon. These men would do away with her even if she was a girl, if they found she had overheard them.

"Get back in the car," Fred was ordering Paul. "I'll shove the door to."

WHEN the strip of light narrowed, Molly eased herself to the floor, weak and shaking from the reaction. She wouldn't open the door, she thought, until all sound of the car motor had vanished.

The two men were still lingering outside when Molly heard Rock stir! She moved over to lay a hand gently on his forehead.

"Rock!" she whispered. "They're going away, everything will be all right in a minute! Can you hear me? Do you understand?"

"No," he murmured. "It's dark, and I can't move."

She explained what had happened, slowly and with but few words.

"Oh, yes. I get it now," he told her.

"I'll get the cupboard off of you, then I'll fix your arm," she said. "It isn't bleeding any more, I'm sure, and I couldn't get at it with you pinned down like that."

"I'll be all right, Molly," he said in a stronger voice. "And I'm sure if you can get anything to pry this shelf business up a ways, I can drag myself from under."

"There they go!" she exclaimed as they heard the speeding up of a motor. "And are they racing!"

"Open the door so we can see what we're doing," Rock directed.

It was amazing how fast panic subsided when Rock took command, she thought. Here and there a tiny line of light shone along a crack between some of the window boarding. This was not enough to relieve the gloom and Molly moved slowly through the inner doorway and the front room. As she advanced, she caught a crackling sound which grew louder as she neared the outer door. At the same moment Molly smelled smoke.

Her outthrust hands struck the thick planks and she gave a hard shove. The door held fast. Again she shoved, this time flinging all her weight against the barrier. She remembered the strong bar Rock had lifted when they entered. Fred Darbie had dropped that.

And there was no doubt that fire was burning on the porch, against the door, burning with fast quickening fury.

"Rock!" she cried. "They made a fire close to the door. And the door won't open! I *can't* make it!"

"All right," Rock said quickly. "Come here. Kneel beside me and grab hold of the edge of the top shelf. It's a little ways from the floor. See if you can raise it the least bit. Fine! Half an inch more and I can move a little."

She was silent, all her effort expended in lifting on the cupboard. Rock breathed pantingly. His uninjured arm stretched out, the hand clutching for a grip against the floor. "I—can't!" he gasped. "Legs won't move!"

"Dear God!" Molly cried in her heart.

"It's the weight, stopping circulation," she said. "Try again!"

The second effort was vain.

"I know!" Molly cried, remembering the leg. "I'll lever the cupboard higher. While I hold it, you must catch hold of my ankle and pull. You can pull yourself out, Rock. You *must!*"

While they were struggling the crackling of fire came more clearly to their ears and more smoke seeped through into the cabin. It seemed an endless time before Rock was out from under the weight holding down his body and legs. Then he said, between panting breaths, "We couldn't break out of those windows without heavier tools to work with, or a lot more time. There is a weak spot at the bottom of the back door. The wide board across the bottom."

MOLLY groped her way to the door while he was talking.

"See if you can pound the cleats off with that oak table leg. I'll get over there in a minute and help," Rock said, his voice firmer now. "I haven't broken my legs. It's only that left arm that's hurt. We'll make it!"

"Sure we will," Molly agreed stoutly, though the air was fast filling with smoke that already oppressed her lungs and stung her eyes. She worked frenziedly, tearing at the cleats with her hands, hammering with the clumsy table leg. She could tell by his voice that Rock was getting closer.

"I can't stand up yet," he said, "but I'll soon make it. When the board is off, crawl out as fast as you can and run. I think the roof has caught fire and the dried grass and stuff is probably burning all around us now. Run for the brook and drop into the water."

"All right," she agreed, with mental reservations.

"One cleat off!" Rock exclaimed as he heard it fall to the floor. "Wait, let me yank at that board. Loosened it some. Pry at it! That's right!"

The board came loose with a prolonged screech.

"Out you go!" Rock commanded.

"You first, or I don't move!" Molly said.

"Go *on!*"

"I *won't* leave you in here," she cried fiercely.

"Get outside and you can help pull me," he told her. "*Hurry!*"

Flattening herself against the floor, Molly wriggled through the opening beneath the door. A spark fell on her wrist as she turned to help Rock, who was squirming after, dragging his wounded arm and wincing.

More sparks fell. The air was filled with them. Bits of burning brush swirled past them. When Rock staggered to his feet, Molly pulled his good arm across her shoulders and he stumbled at her side towards the stream that came down the small canyon to join the Hondo.

The cabin roof was flaming high now, the dried logs of the walls burning with rapidly increasing fury. The heat scorched Molly's cheeks and she saw that brush was burning in front of the cabin clear to the bank of the Hondo.

"Fire's spreading!" she gasped.

"Don't think it'll go so terribly far," Rock said. "But it's going to be mighty hot around here for a while. This water's too shallow to do much good. We'll have to work up a ways."

Afterwards Molly tried in vain to remember the details of the next hour. Their progress ahead of the fire that advanced more than halfway up the box canyon was torture. Rock's bruised legs almost refused to carry him. Sometimes he dropped, to be urged up again by Molly, staggering on her feet but still pushing on, making a few yards, resting, struggling again.

Finally they arrived at a spot where the stream had spread in shallow rivulets, forming a gem-like meadow that even the dry season had not parched. There was a deeper pool near the center, beside which they lay on a grassy hummock, breath gradually slowing from the gasping efforts of their smoke-clogged lungs.

With the aid of Rock's pocket knife Molly removed his sleeve, and found a deep score through the flesh of his left arm. Bleeding had stopped and the wound had a healthly look, but she knew how perilously close infection might be. She bandaged it as well as she could with strips torn from his shirt.

They were too exhausted to talk much. Rock told Molly their horses must have broken free and would work their way back to the ranch. "Yours was standing in such thick brush and I doubt if those birds ever saw it," he said. "They probably believed I was alone. Posy and Pat will set out to look for us. I know those boys, and they'll come down this way. They might come anyhow, after they see the smoke from the burning cabin. We'll try to work back to Hondo Creek after the fire slows down."

AS HER wet clothing dried on her body, Molly felt stiff and sore, and she knew that Rock was putting up a front. The strained lines of his face betrayed that he was on the verge of caving in. Fortunately the sun was still high enough to inject warmth into the air, but night would bring the penetrating chill of high country and Molly knew they must make an effort to find shelter.

She had found a stout stick for Rock to use as a cane and they started slowly back down the little canyon. When they reached the edge of the fire area, there were occasional tiny tongues of red lapping at some bit of dried grass, or still feeding on a stick. But the glow had died down ahead and the smoke had blown into thinner and thinner streamers.

They rested many times before they neared Hondo Creek. The cabin still smouldered, with now and then a flaring of red light. They circled around it and made the bridge. But the minutes they waited seemed age-long.

"How far is it to the main road?" Molly finally asked.

"A mile or so," Rock replied.

"The ranch is nearer," Molly declared, "and we're going to head that way. The Darbies will have gone home before this, to supper. But Posy and Pat will be there as well as Sarah and Slyvia. We won't be in any danger."

"And of course we haven't the least idea who did the shooting or set the fire," Rock said ironically.

"Of course not," Molly said, "We were both unconscious. When the fire began to roast us, we wakened."

"Guess you're right," Rock agreed. "We'll crawl along, I'll yell once in awhile, and likely the boys will come along and pick us up."

The sun had dropped below the horizon, leaving only the afterglow when they found themselves near the long private road that lead across the range from the main road to the Hondo ranch house. They were gazing in that direction when both heard a car approaching from the direction of town.

"It's Paul and Fred!" Molly gasped.

"Hold tight," Rock warned. "They must've already spotted us. Got to bluff it."

"Think what a shock they'll have," Molly giggled hysterically.

The car slowed when it came near. Rock leaned on the stick, standing close at Molly's side. The two men in the front seat stared at them fixedly. Only partial recognition came at first. Smoke-blackened, their clothing in rags, they bore small resemblance to themselves.

"M-Molly!" Paul exclaimed, leaning from the car.

"It's me," she replied, trying to speak naturally. "And Rock."

"Rock?" Fred echoed.

"Don't wonder you didn't recognize us," Rock put in. "Sure glad you came along to give us a lift.

"Yes, get in the car," Paul said, opening the door behind him. "What happened to you?"

"I'll say, what happened," Molly said bravely. "Somebody we couldn't see shot Rock. He fell down and the cupboard fell on him, knocking me out cold at the same time. Before I knew what was happening, the cabin was on fire."

"You're all mixed up," Rock told her. "We went for a ride, went in to take a look at the old cabin, and all that happened."

"I see," Fred said. "Well, it's rather a good idea not to prowl around empty cabins."

"I never will again," she said meekly. Molly surreptitiously squeezed Rock's fingers. She had a feeling they weren't going over so well. This increased when the mirror in front revealed the glance exchanged between the brothers.

"That's a funny tale, Rock," Paul said. "Someone you didn't know shot you, the cupboard fell down and you and Molly were insensible until the burning cabin aroused you."

"It's true," Molly declared.

"Guess we better drive them to town and have the doc fix up Rock's wound," Fred said, swerving from the road to a smooth spot spot and bringing the car around."

"I can dress it for tonight," Molly said quickly. "He needs immediate rest more than anything."

"Okay, we'll see that he has it," Fred told her.

"They're not going to take us to Travis," Molly whispered. "Rock, I'm frightened."

ROCK was intently watching their reflections. He could follow the movements of Paul's lips.

"They're onto us," Rock said. "Watch me, and play up!"

He leaned forward. "Paul, Molly prefers to go to the ranch and so do I!"

"And *we* prefer to take you in the other direction," Paul replied. "You'll do it our way."

He was watching them in the mirror now. Rock appeared to relax. But Molly saw that he was gripping the stick that lay across his knees.

"My toes hurt!" she exclaimed. Reaching down, she wriggled her foot out of her riding boot. This had a hard heel which might have possibilities as a weapon. Did the Darbies have a gun in the car, she wondered.

They came to a sandy stretch where the road curved twice. Fred slowed. Rock's stick caught him a blow on the side of the head and Fred slumped over the steering wheel as Paul turned, jerking a gun from his pocket. Molly's bootheel came down on that hand with all her strength back of it. The gun dropped.

Rock had reached over with his long right arm and grasped the wobbling wheel. Paul's left arm delivered a jab at Rock's chin, but missed the target.

"Knock him out!" Rock commanded.

The boot was already descending. But the blow grazed Paul's head and he made a lunge back at Rock. The car, deprived of gas, was rolling to a stop. Molly flung herself on Paul's shoulders like a cat, grabbing for his hair and forcing his head down. He fought and writhed about in the seat, but she clung. Rock couldn't hit him for fear of hurting Molly.

He leaned over to try for a gun in Fred's pocket. There was none.

Thrusting open the rear door on his side, Rock dropped from the car, limped around and opened the door beside Paul. He saw the glint of metal on the floor. Paul's gun. Drawing his arm back for greater force, Rock shot a punch straight at Paul's belly. Paul doubled up and the flailing legs went limp. Reaching in, Rock grabbed the forty-five from the car floor.

"That'll be all," he said grimly, jabbing the gun barrel against Paul's ribs. "Hoist your brother into the back seat and get in there with him. Molly, can you drive?"

"Yes," she said.

"Turn back for the ranch. We'll make the sheriff come and get his brother-in-law." Paul snarled. "I'll get you both for this, plenty."

"How do you dare do a think like this?"

"You will, eh?" Rock laughed sardonically. "You've pulled your last stunt. You're on the way to the pen, for murder and attempted murder!"

"You're crazy! Damned crazy!" Paul blustered.

Rock made no reply. When Molly slipped into the driver's seat, he was on his knees in the seat beside her, holding the gun on the two Darbies.

When they arrived at the ranch Posy and Pat were about to ride out.

"Just going to look for you," Pat said. "Where the devil have you been?" he added, when he got a good look at the pair in the front seat.

"To hell and back," Rock replied, grinning. "Don't ask any more questions but tote that bird in the back seat into the living room and dump him down. You march!" he directed Paul.

"Man, oh man, is this ever going to be something!" Posy exclaimed.

Sylvia was exclaiming hysterically from the porch as the procession advanced.

"Out of the way and don't interfere," Rock told her, urging Paul along with the gun.

"I'll be damned!" Rock exploded when they entered the front door.

IN THE center of the room in a big chair sat old Mac.. The thin white hair and gaunt face gave him the look of an apparition. But his eyes were flaming from their deep sockets.

"We couldn't keep him in that wheelchair," Sarah cried. "He was possessed of devils, this afternoon. Fumed and fussed till I thought he was goin' crazy. When them horses come in without Molly an' Rock, out here he come a-stampin', that cast on one foot and a blanket wound around him. Staggerin', he was, but he says he's up to stay!"

Rock went over to him. "Taking hold again, are you, Old-Timer?" he said.

"You bet I am," Mac vowed. "Been a-gettin' ready for quite a spell. Thought this was a good time to try out my strength."

"I'll say it is," Rock assented.

"What's that pair been doing now?" Mac demanded, pointing at Paul and the arousing Fred.

"It's a long story," Rock replied. "Boiled down, we can say, murder and arson. I know they set fire to the old cabin across the Hondo. I am sure they murdered David MacDonald and probably buried his body under the floor

of that cabin." He paused to glance at Molly apologetically. "I also believe Paul killed Eb, and Chet shot at me in the cabin."

"Posy, you drive to town and get Hamp Webb," Mac ordered.

"It's a frame-up," Paul declared excitedly. "He's lying."

"I s'pose it's a frame-up like that will you've probably got all ready to probate when I die, giving my estate to my deceased wife, which means her heirs," Mac said. "Thibaut'd fix one for you, an' I'm bettin' he did. I heard gossip, when I was layin' in a coma. And I s'pose you'll say it's a frame-up when I tell you I seen the head and shoulders of the fellow that started them rocks rollin' down the cliff to stampede my team. I seen you, Paul Darbie. But I outsmarted you!"

He turned from the Darbies with a gesture of disgust. "Now, where is my granddaughter, Molly Vance MacDonald?" he asked.

"Molly!" Sylvia gasped. "Why, you little sneak!"

"Now, now, woman!" Mac snapped. "I don't wanta talk hard to a member of your sex, but you might drive me to it."

When Molly went over to him, he said, taking her hand in the clasp of one that trembled and betrayed the weakness he was dominating, "I'm sorry, girl. I'd got so distrustful I couldn't see truth any place. This old ranch was so full of hidden trails I couldn't recognize a girl that traveled the straight one. But I knew you were Dave's girl, when you flared up at me like that. And right now, I'm telling everybody here present that if Dave is gone, Molly will get the Hondo. I put it in escrow for her dad just before my accident. I wasn't scairt of no wills anybody could cook up!" He drew a deep sigh. "Guess I'll leave the rest for tomorrow. You talk to the sheriff, Rock, will you?"

"Sure," Rock returned.

When Mac was back on his wheeled couch, he said to Molly, "The sands are runnin' out, my dear, but I'm a tired old man, and that's all right. After tonight, and knowin' you, I'm satisfied. We'll talk some more tomorrow. You go and see to Rock, now."

But the sheriff had come and gone, and Chet had been arrested too, before she could dress Rock's arm. The scene with the sheriff wasn't pleasant and she was relieved when he had taken the three Darbies away. Sylvia went to town with them to stay at the hotel, though Molly told her that was unnecessary. "You are having both my husband and my son arrested," she sobbed. "I hate everybody on the Hondo."

"I never was so tickled in my life," Sarah told Molly before she went to her room. "Didn't I tell you them Darbies wasn't much!"

Neither Rock nor Molly spoke more than half a dozen words until she had his arm in a professional dressing. Then he laid his other hand on her shoulder and said quietly. "Molly, my dear!"

She smiled up at him, her eyes soft with unshed tears. "I certainly hope I am your dear."

"More than that," he told her. "More than I could put into words. You're the sun, moon and stars, and then some. You are hope and joy and everything a man wants from life."

His good arm went tight about her, and later Molly wondered why a man would search for words when his kisses told her what was in his heart, thrilled her until she knew nothing mattered but the love they shared.

Coming in the Next Issue

Outlaw Competition

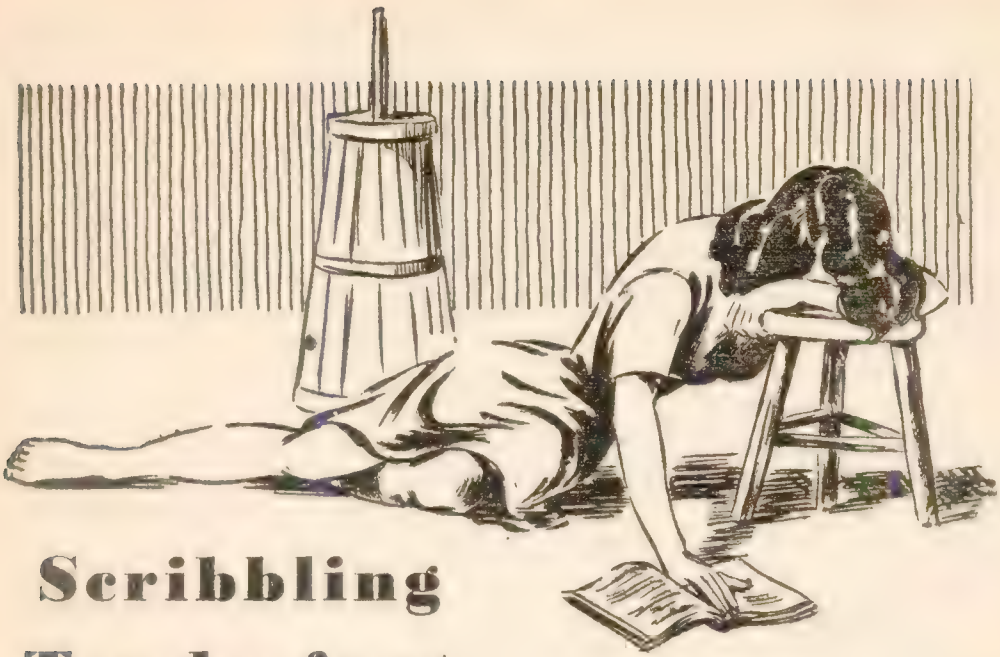
A Breath-Taking Novelette

By Ray Palmer Tracy

Kidnap Tangle

An Entertaining Short Story

By Clee Woods



Scribbling Tenderfoot

By Cecilia Bartholomew

BECAUSE her pride led her astray Little Joe found herself in the arms of the wrong man.

JOANNE (Little Joe) Phillips sat rocking on the gallery of her father's ranch house after supper and watched the cloud of dust that marked the approach of the horseman. Her father, Big Joe, had his back to the road so he wasn't watching, but their neighbor and regular visitor Henry (Andy) Andrews sat beside Joanne and followed the cloud in its wavering, halting progress. He spat expertly between the posts of the railing.

"Here's someone who's either drunk or asleep, or a tenderfoot," he said. His voice showed equal contempt for all.

Big Joe turned. "He's none of my outfit," he said.

The stranger seemed about to pass them by, hesitated, then cautiously reined in his mount and turned into the JP ranch.

"Good evening," he said, flushing. And when the flush died down his face was white and tired. He made a motion to take off his hat but that would have meant letting go of the reins, and he changed his mind.

" 'Light," said Big Joe.

"Thanks," said the stranger, "but if I once get off this animal, I'm afraid I won't get back on." His wry smile admitted he recognized the picture he made, but the line of his jaw was stubborn. "This was a little different from a ride in the park."

"You can't go much farther tonight," said Big Joe. "Besides there's no place else to stop between here and my neighbor's outfit." His head indicated Andy, and the end of the sentence left hanging said quite clearly he thought the stranger would never make it. "You'd better put up here."

"Thanks," said the stranger. "You're probably right. Thanks." But he still sat the horse.

"Little Joe," her pa said, "go rustle some food for Mr.—"

Little Joe got up but waited to hear the stranger say, "Dalton—Bill Dalton." He got off his horse painfully, stumbling a bit, but making no excuses or explanations.

He was an honest-to-goodness tenderfoot, Little Joe was thinking, and she was curious about him. He must have come from clear back East for she had seen nothing like him even down at Fulton, the county seat. She

hastily warmed up some stuff left from supper and hurried back to the porch.

Mr. Dalton was sitting in the rocker she had vacated. It was queer the difference in him. Up on the horse he had looked awkward and comical, but sitting in the rocker, or getting to his feet as he was now even with an evident painfulness, he was much more at his ease than her father or Andy. He was tall, as tall as either, and he wasn't wearing the high cowboy heels, but it would have taken two or more of him to make one of them. His thinness was something that could be filled out though and his bones were good—broad shoulders, narrow hips, long legs. His hands caught her eye. They were as smooth as hers, and much whiter. She handed him the plate of food.

"Thank you," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

"Sit yourself," she mumbled. "Eat."

The three belonging to this cow country turned their heads politely to give him the privacy he needed for consuming his supper. He started leisurely and was inclined to talk but soon became aware they expected him to eat quickly and be done, and he complied. At the end Big Joe offered him a cigar and he refused, taking from his pocket a pack of cigarettes.

That was the sign Big Joe had been waiting for. He had offered his hospitality, now he was entitled to ask some questions.

"You going far?" he asked.

"No," said Bill Dalton, unaware that he might just as well throw a bomb in their midst. "As a matter of fact I'm going to be a neighbor of yours. I just signed up to homestead the section next to yours, Mr. Phillips."

"You what—" demanded Andy, getting to his feet.

"I said I just signed up to—" began Bill Dalton.

"I think we all heard you right," said Big Joe.

"You can't do it," began Andy. "It won't hold. You've got no right. Everybody knows that section belongs to me. My cattle are grazing on it right now."

"That doesn't constitute a claim," said Dalton.

Andy was furious. "That's my land," he said, "and, by God, it's going to stay my land."

Dalton looked at him a moment speculatively. "Then just why," he said, "if that section belongs to you, did you never file on it?"

"Didn't need to." Andy cooled down a bit, but he couldn't hide his embarrassment. Little Joe was embarrassed too, so she changed the subject.

"Nothing grows on this land," she said. "Too much wind, not enough rain."

"She knows," said Big Joe. "She's wasted a lot of time trying to grow some flowers."

Dalton looked at Little Joe and she wished she hadn't spoken. She was very much aware of her bare brown legs and feet. And she was ashamed of the straight cotton dress she wore tonight, as if she didn't have anything better. She didn't know that her body gave shape and beauty to it.

She dropped her head until her brown hair fell over her face, and then she looked out from under it. The stranger was still looking at her. But suddenly her embarrassment fell away. Suddenly she was comfortable under his gaze. She raised her head and looked back at him, brown eyes not bold but frank, like a child's, as if she was getting acquainted with him. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

Andy looked like he wanted to do something about that. "It's a mean land," he said. "It'll drive you off."

Bill Dalton finally lifted his eyes from Joanne. "No, it won't," he said. "Neither will you."

NEXT morning Little Joe was late in coming down. She had put on one of her pretty town dress and then taken it off again and put on shirt and levis. Defiantly she parted the hair she had brushed into soft waves, and braided it in two tight pigtails. Her only concession to vanity and the flutter that filled her at the thought of Bill Dalton was a little red ribbon at the end of each braid. Then she went downstairs to find only her father.

"He's gone," Big Joe said. "Gone to prove up on his homestead," he added and started to laugh, his big body shaking.

Anger rose in Little Joe. "Well, why not?" she demanded. "Why shouldn't he?"

"I wasn't laughing at Mr. Dalton," Big Joe said gently but with a rebuke in his voice.

Little Joe's anger vanished. She should've known she could trust her pa. Their eyes met, and as Little Joe read the thought in his, her lips curved deliciously and they laughed to-

gether until tears ran down Big Joe's cheeks and he had to pull out his big red bandanna and wipe them away.

"All the same," he said when he could talk, "Henry Andrews is a good steady man. He'll make some girl a good husband. He's got a nice spread, too, for a young man."

Little Joe's eyes widened in surprise. "Why, Pa," she said, "Andy isn't young. You seem younger than he is."

"Go on," said Big Joe, "go find something to do and don't bother me."

Little Joe knew he wasn't displeased. She was lucky, she thought. Even if she didn't have a mother, she had the best pa in the world.

"Did Andy go with Mr. Dalton?" she asked.

Big Joe thought for a minute before he answered. "No," he said, "but he promised to send down a man to help him raise his shanty."

"Andy did? Pa!"

"Why yes," said Big Joe. "What's the matter, daughter?"

"Pa, you know what Andy means!"

"Mr. Dalton seemed very grateful," Big Joe said.

Little Joe reached up and shook him, or rather tried to shake him, but it was like trying to shake a mountain.

"Pa, you go right on over there and take care of Mr. Dalton," she demanded. "Andy means no good by him, and you know it as well as I do."

Big Joe shook his head. "It won't hurt to let Mr. Dalton handle this alone," he said.

Pa was right, as usual. Let Mr. Dalton prove himself. But just the same . . . just the same . . . Little Joe had to check up on how he was doing.

Little Joe circled lazily away from the JP Ranch, wondering if she was fooling her pa, and deciding with reddening cheeks that she wasn't. So she sat up straighter on her horse, dug her bare heels into his sides, and headed straight for where she wanted to go.

The piece of land that Mr. Dalton had filed his claim on was one of the prettiest in this section of the country. It was more heavily wooded than the surrounding part and gently rolling. Just before it rose into the rocky mountains that backed it, it levelled out forming a natural clearing for a house. Andy had been saving that section of land for her—when she married him. It would be her homestead, and when she said the word he would build her a house. It would be nice to feel the mountains at your back while you looked out and down into the valley, but she would never live on that section if Andy went with it.

She headed for the clearing but hadn't reached it before she heard the sound of shots. She didn't stop but rode out of the shelter of the trees right up to Dalton who stood looking curiously at the crown of his hat. It had a hole through it. The gunfire broke off abruptly. A tattoo of hoofs faded away off through the timber. Little Joe got off her horse and looked at the hat, too.

"I don't think he meant to hurt you," she said uncertainly. "He was only only trying to scare you."

Bill Dalton looked back at his hat. "It must be nice to feel so sure of yourself," he said.

"You got a gun?" she asked.

"No." Then he added, "I've never needed one—before." She was looking at him soberly, so he smiled at her.

"Well, you better get one now," she said.

He shrugged. "Maybe I will." He put the hat back on his head, and picked up his axe. "Well," he said, "let's get to work."

LITTLE Joe was delighted to be taken so naturally and she trotted after him. He worked slowly, stopping for breathers, laughing at himself for his lack of strength, but slowly the little one-roomed shanty with leanto for cooking took form. He worked silently for the most part but Little Joe was strangely content.

Suddenly he sat back on his heels, pushed back his hat off his damp forehead and looked up at her. His eyes were bluer than her levis were—even before they had been laundered so many times.

"You're nice to have around," he said.

She blushed and said, "It's fun."

"It is fun," he agreed, "making things. I haven't made anything with my hands for a long time." He got to his feet. "Will you stay and have dinner with me, Miss Phillips?" he asked, pretending formality.

"Me and Pa would like you to eat with us," she said.

"I accept," he said promptly. "You'll have a better dinner than I have. By the way, my friends call me Bill."

"Bill," she said.

He put out his hand and just brushed her cheek. She wanted to grab it and hold it tight

to her. She took to this man so naturally that it frightened her, yet she didn't mind being frightened.

"Now," he said, "Joanne, turn around the other way and don't look while I board this animal of mine."

Little Joe wasn't quite sure how serious he was, but tenderfoot or not, she could see he was already more at home. He just naturally took to a horse.

They laughed and joked all the way back to the JP headquarters. Big Joe looked curiously at his daughter when they arrived. Something about her made him misty-eyed. They ate and then sat out on the porch smoking and talking. Little Joe was very happy. She could see that Big Joe liked Bill Dalton. Then Big Joe invited Bill to spend the night, since his own shanty wasn't finished, and Little Joe went to sleep content because he was under the same roof with her.

In the morning she rode back over with Bill. "I can help him some," she explained unnecessarily to her father. She was radiant. She hardly seemed to move, she floated.

"How do you look like that so early in the morning?" Bill asked, teasing.

"Like what?"

Bill threw back his head and laughed. "Feminine is feminine wherever you find it," he said. "Like the morning," he added and his eyes were admiring.

But when they reached the trees that edged his clearing something came to spoil the morning, to dull her radiance. She stole a look at Bill and his face was white and grim. As they came out of the woods, they stopped side by side and looked into the clearing. His shanty was gone, burned to the ground.

"Still think he doesn't mean to hurt me?" he asked. "Just scare me?"

Little Joe's eyes were filled with tears.

"That's all right, Joanne," Bill said. "I'm not hurt, and I'm not scared." The tears were overflowing now and he put an arm around her. "Don't cry, Little Joe," he said, and he was comforting her instead of her comforting him.

BILL didn't leave his claim again. He rebuilt the shanty. He dug the ground and planted a vegetable garden and gave Little Joe a spot for some flowers. He bought a shorthorn bull and half a dozen cows, some chickens, and some baby ducks. And he started his house, working at it slowly but lovingly.

There were accidents. The bull got into the vegetable garden. But bulls, Bill said, were always getting into vegetable gardens. A coyote or some such animal got into his chicken coop one night and finished off most of the chickens. A coyote that wore cowboy shoes. The baby ducks ate their breakfast one day and then all lay down by the pan and died.

But Bill was patient. He replanted the garden and repaired the fence; he put a trap in the chicken coop; he bought some more baby ducks. Then for a while he wasn't so busy.

One day when Little Joe rode over he was sitting in the sun scribbling on some papers.

"You writing a letter?" she asked.

He hesitated then said, "Yes, you might call it that."

Little Joe marveled. She had never seen anyone write a letter that long, but she didn't bother him. She just sat down in the sun beside him and watched him. She must have sat there a long time, but she didn't know it. Pretty soon he stretched, looked at her, and smiled.

"You're nice to have around," he said and added, "I seem to be saying that all the time."

She pointed to the papers. "What did you say?"

"Oh," he answered casually, "I just said how the cows got lost and the bull got into the garden, and my house burned down. And how a little brown girl came over and cried about it."

"Me?" she asked. She was filled with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. And shame. "I wish I wasn't so brown."

"You're all brown, like a brownie," he said.

He held her little pointed chin in his hand but even if he hadn't been touching her, she couldn't have moved. But her face showed disappointment.

"Or would you rather be a wood nymph? With the woods in your hair, the sun in your eyes—and your body like the stream."

"Why," she said, wonder in her eyes, "that sounds just like a book."

"It is," he answered, after a pause.

"But you're not reading."

"That part I know by heart," he answered.

ONE day Little Joe arrived home to find Henry Andrews talking with her father. She wondered what was the matter, but she wanted to be herself for a while longer and think about the things that Bill Dalton

had said to her. So she said "Howdy," and tried to slip past to her room. Her father stopped her.

"Come here, Little Joe," he said. "Andy's got something to say to you."

"Pa—" Little Joe looked frightened. She didn't want to have to tell Andy she wasn't going to marry him. "Pa, not now," she said. "I'm tired. I want to go wash up. Then I'll come back."

Andy stepped up then. "Listen to her," he said. "She's tired. Ask her where she's been, and ask her what she's been doing to be so tired."

"Pa knows where I've been," Little Joe said.

"Does he know what you've been doing?" Andy asked, and his voice rose. "Spending your time alone with this stranger, day after day."

Big Joe spoke then. "What do you mean, Andy?"

"I mean him and her is philanderin'. And a girl don't get a good reputation from philanderin'. No man wants to marry a girl after that."

"A girl doesn't want no man to marry her," Little Joe answered fiercely.

"Say what you've got to say, Andy," Big Joe warned. "And say it quick."

Andrews pulled out from his shirt a magazine and showed it with a flourish. "I don't have to say it," he said in triumph. "This says it for me."

Little Joe took the magazine wonderingly. It was opened and folded back at a page with pictures on it. One of the pictures looked like the mountains back of Bill's homestead. The other picture was of a girl. Dark hair fell to her shoulders and across her face so that all you could see plainly were her dark eyes, glowing and shy like a deer's. Her body filled and swelled a straight cotton dress, and below that her legs and feet were bare.

"That's what he thinks of you," Andy said roughly.

Little Joe's cheeks reddened with shame. She couldn't see the beauty of the girl in the picture. She couldn't see her elfin-like charm, the natural grace of her body without adornment. All she could see were her bare feet and legs. Why did he have to show her that way? If he had wanted a picture, she would have dressed up for him in her town clothes. But he didn't have to print her that way.

"Well, Little Joe?" asked her pa.

"He only wants her company," Andy shouted, "so he can shame her in writing. No man—"

"That's enough," said Big Joe. "You've had your say."

"Pa," began Little Joe.

"All right, Little Joe," he said.

She took the magazine and escaped to her room.

LITTLE JOE stayed home the next day and the day after. She had discarded her levis and sat around the ranch house dressed up in her town dresses, with beaded moccasins on her feet.

She was sitting like that on the gallery one morning when Bill Dalton rode up. She watched him come and her heart grew so big in her that she thought she would faint. It was the town dress, she told herself, so tight and binding that made her feel that way, but she was glad she had it on.

She watched Bill Dalton ride up and she remembered that first evening she had watched him come. He was like a different man now, yet the same. He had filled out, his blond hair was blonder, and his cheeks were brown. He didn't have to be ashamed of the way he rode a horse. He belonged on it now.

He came up to the bottom of the steps and looked up at her. "You expecting someone, ma'am?" he asked. "So dressed up."

"Who would I be expecting?" she countered.

"Why, me." And he smiled at her. His smile was unsteady, but not his eyes. They were very steady.

She got to her feet, her hands clenched into fists. "Bill Dalton," she said, "I hate you. I hate you!"

He reached her in one long step and stood over her. It made her dizzy to feel how big he was. "Hold on," he said. "You'd better start at the beginning."

"You write stories," Little Joe accused.

Bill flushed but his glance didn't waver. "I was going to tell you—at the right time, Little Joe. But—is there something wrong about writing stories?"

Little Joe shook her head angrily. "Those things you said to me, you didn't mean them. You were just practising on me. I found them in the story."

"You don't understand, Little Joe," Bill started. But she wouldn't listen.

"You're writing about me to shame me,"

she said. "You want my company to study on me, so you can make fun of me. You never saw anybody like me before—anybody who goes barefoot and wears pants like a boy, and short dresses. When you've learned all about me that you want to know, you'll go back East where you came from and laugh at me. I'm a new character to you, that's all."

"I know where you got all that from," Bill said through tight jaws. "It's right in a line with burning my house and killing my animals."

"Isn't it true?" Little Joe asked.

"You'll have to decide that yourself," Bill said softly. "You've got both endings now; you choose the one you think fits best."

The next few weeks Little Joe followed her pa around everywhere he went. It was as if she felt herself so alone that she had to have his company. She did everything he did and worked as hard as a cowboy. Big Joe left her alone. He didn't pester her. He knew a lot about animals that helped him understand people. Then one day when he had decided the time was right, he spoke to her.

"Was over to Dalton's place this morning," he said.

Little Joe made as if she didn't hear, but when he didn't go on, she raised her eyes to his. She looked so little and hurt and bewildered that Big Joe wanted to take her on to his knee and comfort her. But he reckoned she was too big for that now. He cleared his throat.

"That big house he's been building is about finished," he said. "Lot of trouble to go to for a feller living all alone."

He could see the pulse beating at the base of her throat.

"He's got a good-sized bunch of beef running on his land. Got a couple cowboys working for him, too. Got a good start, for a young man." He looked at Little Joe and she looked away. "Pride is a good thing spread thin," he said, "but in big doses, it's an awful bitter pill. If you can't swoller it, spit it out."

IT WAS Henry Andrews' evening to come to supper, and Little Joe put herself out to please him. Knowing sorrow had made her all at once a woman, with a woman's charms, and a woman's knowledge of a man's thoughts and desires. Andy was flushed with pleasure, and sweat had broken out on his forehead and upper lip. He kept moistening his lips with his tongue. Little Joe leaned close to him to light his cigar until the fragrance of her was all about him, making him dizzy.

Big Joe got up from his chair violently.

"What's the matter, Pa," Little Joe asked.

"Joanne—" he started, and that was the first time he had called her that that she could remember. "Nothing," he said. And sat down again.

"It's a lovely evening, isn't it?" Little Joe said languidly.

Andy tore his eyes from her and looked at the sky. It was the first time he had ever scanned it for anything less practical than rain. "Sure is," he agreed.

Big Joe snorted.

"The air is so soft and fragrant it makes one think of flowers and sweet-smelling grass, doesn't it?" Little Joe went on, unmoved by her pa's disparaging sounds.

"Makes one think of other sweet-smelling things, Little Joe," Andy said with difficulty.

Big Joe got out of his chair. "All I smell is cows," he said disgustedly. "I'm going to bed."

He went indoors, shutting the screen ungently. Little Joe laughed briefly at her father's anger. She was looking up at the sky with a wistful face.

"Pa just likes to think he isn't romantic," she said softly.

Andy cleared his throat. He was all in a turmoil tonight and this was a game at which he had little practice. "Little Joe," he asked, "you ain't still hankering after that tenderfoot?"

"I hate him," she said with sudden feeling. She was filled with this emotion. She was about to burst with it and she made herself believe it was really hate. Her fingers clenched into the palms of her hands. "And," she added fiercely, "I am absolutely through with him. I wish he'd never showed up in these parts."

She turned her eyes from their inward gaze and looked at Andy, at first without seeing him really, then as their focus steadied seeing him with a terrible clarity. He seemed to feel the insistence in her look for he shifted from one foot to another uneasily.

"Now, Little Joe," he began.

"If he had just never come around," she said, "or if he would go away—then, maybe, things would be like they used to be."

"As they used to be," Andy repeated her words. In those days Andy had been her suitor, and Big Joe had backed him. In those days everything had been pretty bright for

Andy Andrews. It was something a man might want to have back again.

"You don't need to worry about him any more," he whispered hoarsely. Then he took her in his arms and he kissed her very hard on the mouth, and the light in his eyes was a bright flame. "You and me will be like we was?" he said.

"Yes," she said, and she tried to believe it. She tried to believe that by taking Andy back she could even the score against the tenderfoot who had written her up like a wild little savage. And she kissed Andy back.

LITTLE JOE shivered convulsively when the last hoofbeat of Andy's horse dwindled into the night; and she rubbed her lips angrily with the back of her hand. That kiss had done it. That kiss had broken the spell into which she had put herself. That kiss had never been meant for Andy Andrews.

That kiss had been storing itself up in her from the time she had first seen Bill Dalton. It had been added to every time he had come around. It had grown with everything they shared—the work they had done together, the rides side by side, the sitting in the sun talking.

With that sudden awareness came fear. Andy had headed toward Bill's ranch when he left her tonight. He had not turned his horse toward his own home. Little Joe raced into the house with such a clatter Big Joe was already sitting up in bed when she rushed through his doorway.

"Pa," she cried, "I told Andy I hated Bill Dalton. But I don't hate Bill. I didn't mean it. I was crazy. Andy's ridin' to Bill's."

Big Joe nodded as if he had been expecting something like this.

"Saddle up a couple of horses," he said slowly. "I'll meet you at the corral."

Long before they reached Bill's place red glowed in the sky from the blazing barn that Andy had fired; and as the girl and her father rode in closer this same holocaust showed them plainly that Bill had stopped Andy before the house had been turned into another bonfire. Bill had caught Andy at it and they were fighting in the bright light with blind intensity. Little Joe would have ridden right between them, to break it up, but her father put a restraining hand on her shoulder.

"Let them fight," he said. "That fight's been between them from the day Dalton rode in. It has to come out some time."

Rebellion beat within Little Joe, but she knew her pa was right. The moonlight was no whiter than her face. She was taking every blow that Andy landed. It was a weird thing to watch: the quiet night, the moonlight like a searchlight on them, the silent men stalking each other. Bill had managed to break away from Andy. It was his only chance, for Andy was heavier, Andy was less scrupulous. Andy fought with everything—feet, head, knees, as well as fists. Bill fought with his brain. He went 'round and 'round Andy, just out of reach, dancing on his toes, tantalizing him, getting in a light jab each time Andy opened up.

"Scribblin' tenderfoot?" Big Joe asked incredulously.

Little Joe knew that was big praise, and fear for him left her heart.

ANDY by now was livid with rage and frustration. Throwing caution aside, he lunged at Bill with all the strength of his hard body. If he had connected, Bill would have dropped like a felled tree, but he didn't. Bill wasn't there, and thrown off balance by his own blow, Andy just lifted his chin to Bill's fist. They met with a sweet solid sound and Andy was lifted clear off his feet and landed with a thud.

Andy was out for a count of ten and more. The fight was over. Bill turned then as if he had known Little Joe was there all the time.

"That barn," he said, "was too small, anyway."

Big Joe cleared his throat. Little Joe nodded as if he had spoken to her. She slid from her horse and handed the reins to him. Then she went to the side a bit and spat delicately.

"Something the matter?" her pa asked.

"That bitter pill you spoke to me about," she said. "I couldn't swallow it so I had to spit it out." Then she went right up to Bill and faced him bravely. "You told me I'd have to decide for myself," she told him. "You told me I'd have to choose the ending to the story that fit the best." She reached up and put her hands on the shining hair she had longed to touch, and pulled his head down to hers. Then she gave him the kiss that was meant for him. It had missed its mark earlier that evening, but there were plenty more where it came from.

"This is the end of the story that fits," she whispered.

"It's not the end," Bill said, his lips very close to hers. "It's only the beginning."

MATCHED RIDIN'

By S. Omar Barker

BESSIE didn't like to see good husband material risking its neck on a high-pitching bronc.

THIS was back in the days before rodeo tucked in its shirt-tail and wrote a book of rules. Nowadays the bronc-stomper straddles a committee saddle which is laced on in a chute. There's a dozen rules about how to behave hisself in the saddle if he wants to score, and he's only got to ride till the whistle blows—usually about ten seconds.

Back in them old days you laced your own hull on a bronc snubbed up to somebody's saddle horn, and the only rule you had to foller in uncockin' him was not to pull leather. You just clumb on and took it rough either till you bucked off or had wrung the bronc dry of pitchin'.

Except that after a five-minute spell of such horse-tamin', many a young buckaroo clumb off walkin' like his kidneys was lodged up behind his lungs, and a good many of the womenfolks didn't much like it. Specially if the peeler happened to be some feller they was married to—or fixin' to be.

Blue-eyed Bessie Woodley hadn't never let on who she was fixin' to marry, but when Hank Wilby and Smoky McGowan cooked up a matched bronc-riding for the Fourth of July barbecue at Yerboso, she laid it on the taw line to both of 'em. They was both settin' on her daddy's porch that mild June evening "watchin' her chaw her wax and scratch her purty elbow." Which is just an old bunkhouse way of saying they was sparkin' her—without making much headway.

Hank Wilby was a long, lank lunk of blondish human rawhide with big hands and little feet, a good-lookin' face, and a habit of telling how it used to be back in Texas. Smoky McGowan was about medium height, medium build, of a medium dark complexion, with straight black hair, smoky grey eyes, and a habit of joshing himself and everybody else so sober that you never knowed for sure how to take it.

Bessie Woodley—well, there ain't no way to describe a gal like her. You never thought so much about what *she* looked like as how it made *you* feel to look at her. She wasn't very big, yet big enough to shape out nice. If she had been a flower instead of a gal, she'd have been a blue-eyed buttercup bloomin' on a shinnery bush with maybe a few mesquite thorns on it. Of course there ain't no such flower, but there would have been if Bessie Woodley had been born botanical.

She was ranch born and bred, and when you heard some old buck in his seventies wishing he had a gal like her for a daughter, you knowed that what he was really wishin' was that he was fifty years younger—an' had her—period.

She spoke up that June night on the Woodley front porch as sassy as a pet chipmunk, but still sorter sweet.

"Hank," she said, "I hear you and Smoky have matched a bronc-riding for the Fourth."

"You heard right," said Hank Wilby. "Two saddles for a $200 purse and a side bet. You take a matched ridin' like that back in Texas an'—"

"A side bet?" inquired Bessie, as if it was a terrible thing. "Isn't it enough to get yourselves all busted up, without betting away your hard-earned wages?"

"Hank," busted in Smoky McGowan in his sober drawl, "shall we tell her?"

"Tell her what?"

"Maybe we better not. You never know which way a heifer will jump. What would you say, Bessie Bright-Eyes, if I told you that the side bet between me an' Hank on this bronc-ridin' is a gal?"

"A girl?" gasped Bessie.

"Same thing either way you pernounce it," shrugged Smoky. "A gal, a girl, a maid or *muchacha*—they all act the same when they know they've gotcha."

"If you want to make rhymes," scolded Bessie, "I can make one, too: If you want a maiden to like you, pal, don't ever refer to a girl as 'gal.' "

"Well, I'm glad we're pals, anyway," sighed Smoky as exaggerated as a locomotive letting off spare steam. "But supposin' I don't want

her to *like* me? Supposin' I want her to love me?"

"Who?" busted in Hank Wilby, suspicious as an old he-wolf. "What in the name of nuggins are you two talkin' about?"

"Love," Smoky told him, sober as a side-saddle. "The emotion of the heart that makes preachers buy curlin' irons an' strong men whimper. Or don't it work that way back in Texas?"

"Back in Texas," said Hank, sounding mighty determined, "if a man—uh—loves a gal—I mean a girl—he don't stall around. He just steps right up an'—an'—"

"And what, Hank?" asked Bessie. She stopped agitatin' her rawhide rocker and kinder leaned forward, as invitin' as a hot biscuit to a bowl of gravy.

Hank got up from the gallery rail and took a step towards her.

"He just steps up an'—an'—he just steps up an'—" he kinder panted, only to choke down like a buzz saw hittin' a knot.

"The gent means he steps right up an' asks her father for her heart and hand," offered Smoky. "Shall I call your pa for him, Bessie Bright-Eyes?"

"Don't call me Bessie Bright-Eyes!" said the gal, kinder icy. "It sounds like a pet squirrel."

"I knowed a feller back in Texas that had a pet prairie dog," offered Hank, trying to keep himself in the conversation somehow. "Called it Loose Heel. It—"

"You mean Lucille," corrected Smoky from where he set on the top step.

"Huh? That's what I said, ain't it?"

"Never mind Smoky's wisecracks, Hank," said Bessie, kinder swallering her giggle. "Let's you and me go sit in the porch swing and talk about this bronc-riding match, while the moon comes up!"

"Yes *ma'am!*" gulped Hank Wilby. He took her arm like he was afraid she couldn't make it over to the swing on her own power. It was a wide ol' swing and she set down about the middle of it. But ol' Hank hadn't more than got set down beside her and started swinging a little so she wouldn't notice him edging closer, when Smoky McGowan set down on the other side. He lighted the smoke he'd been rolling and tossed the makin's acrost her lap to Hank. Now smoking was the last thing Hank Wilby had in mind, but I reckon he figgered that with Smoky sharing the porch swing, he wouldn't be doin' much else, so he might as well roll one.

"Thanks," he grunted. "Say, y'know back in Texas one time I knowed a feller that—"

"BOYS," Bessie Woodley interrupted him, "I wish you'd call off this bronc-riding match."

"If you mean you don't like the idea of us makin' a bet on it to settle which one of us gits a clear field with you," said Smoky, "don't bother your purty head. That was a gag I made up on the spur of the moment, just to see how you'd take it."

"I don't mean that anyway," said the gal earnestly. "I mean—well, it's all right for a man to ride broncs when it's a necessary part of his job. But you know yourselves that the broncs they get for these show-off rides are the worst mankiller outlaws they can find. It's nothing in the world but vanity that makes you cowboys risk your necks to ride them!"

"'Vanity, vanity, all is vanity,'" quoted Smoky.

"Vanity my eye!" snorted Hank Wilby. "How about that $200 purse—not to mention the $50 I stand to win from Smoky?"

"And get yourself crippled up for life!" retorted Bessie.

"Shucks, it ain't that bad, Bessie Bright-Eyes," Smoky protested kinder mild. "I've rode or been throwed off a heap of broncs already, but I'm still able to git around."

"You got your leg broken at Las Vegas two years ago!"

"I got it fixed, too. I figger I'll come through this Yerboso hoss-bustin' still able to stand up in front of a preacher, if I can just find some blue-eyed gal to stand up with me!"

"Me too," chimed in Hank Wilby. "Why, I knowed a bronc-stomper back in Texas that got married to a gal—uh—girl—on crutches!"

"You see?" grinned Smoky. "Even women git their fool selves hurt sometimes, an' still the men marry 'em!"

"It was the man that was on crutches," blinked Hank. "Y'see, a bronc had fell on him, but this ol' Texas ga—ug—girl—said no man could git out of marryin' her that easy!"

"I don't happen to be 'an ol' Texas gal,'" sniffed Bessie. "In my opinion any man that risks becoming a cripple by riding outlaw broncs just to make a show is a—a fool!"

"'Course he is," agreed Smoky with a shrug. "Ain't it the Bible that says all men are fools? Bronc-riders are a special brand, that's all!"

That there was when Bessie Woodley laid it on the taw line. "Then they're a special brand I can do without!" she said. "If you ride those outlaw broncs at Yerboso you don't need to come around me any more—either one of you!"

There was a moment of intensified silence, then Hank Wilby busted out plumb doleful:

"Oh, m'gawd!" he groaned. "There goes two hunderd an' fifty bucks of awful easy money!"

Smoky still never said anything.

"Oh, Hank!" crowed Bessie. "You mean you'll really give up the ride?"

"Tell her you will if she'll marry you, Hank," suggested Smoky dryly. "An' see what she says."

Bessie got up awful sudden out of the porch swing. "Will you please mind your own business, Smoky McGowan?" she inquired icily.

"Sure," said Smoky, and before either Hank or the gal realized what he was up to, he took a solid grip on her arms and kissed her. The only reason she didn't slap his face when he turned her aloose was that he ducked the swing and she missed. Then without saying anything more, Smoky stolled out to his horse, climb on and rode away.

He hadn't rode far in the moonlight till Hank Wilby overtook him.

"Well, when's the weddin', Hank?" he inquired.

"Huh? Oh, none of your damn business!"

"You sure look happy," grinned Smoky, "for a man that's just popped the question to a purty gal an' been accepted."

"Never popped no damn question," growled Hank.

"Shame on you! Ain't you in love with the lady?"

"Who ain't that ever seen her? But damn it—I dunno. I reckon I jest don't savvy these women, nohow."

"Nobody does, Hank," Smoky reassured him. "But I'll give you a tip on this one, for whatever it's worth. I sure don't aim for you to beat my time with her if I can help it, but you an' me have always played it fair, whether bronc-ridin' or wrastlin' with romance, ain't we?"

"Yeah, I reckon so. Only you never had no business kissin' her thataway—not unless she give you permission."

"That don't tally me no score," shrugged Smoky. "You could have done the same thing yourownself. What I want to know, Hank, are you goin' to let her buffalo you out of that bronc-ridin'?"

Hank turned his big frame in the saddle and the moonlight caught a gleam in his eye as they rode along.

"There ain't nobody can buffalo me outa nothin'," he said. "But when a feller's courtin' a gal an' she begs him not to do somethin'—well, maybe that's different."

"Women," said Smoky, "have been tryin' to keep their men from doin' things they consider dangerous ever since Eve kept Adam from steppin' on a snake. But the ones that listen to 'em ain't the kind they pick to marry."

"Huh? You sure o' that?"

Smoky laughed. "Right now I ain't plumb sure of nothin'—but that's my tip as one rival to another, cowboy. You can take it or leave it."

THE ANNUAL Fourth of July Barbecue and Ranch Folks' Reunion was tendered by the merchants and other citizens of Yerboso to all the country folk roundabout as a token of neighborly friendship. But it was mainly their cowboy guests that furnished the entertainment. In them days nobody thought of calling it a rodeo, but in a heap of ways that's what it was, with contests in everything a man could do on horseback. There was also burro races and calf-ridin' for young'uns under twelve whose mas wasn't too scared they might git hurt.

But the main big excitement was the cowboy contests, rough and tough as rasped rawhide. Roughest of all was bronc-bustin' and the toughest of that was whenever a couple of ol' leather-pants peelers challenged each other to what they called "a matched ridin'." For that purpose the toughest, meanest four-legged killer outlaws to be found was dragged to town. Any man that got on one of 'em "took his life in his hands with his fingers greased."

The rumor that Hank Wilby had backed out on his ridin' match with Smoky McGowan sorter set a lot of old saddle men back on their heels. Specially when the calf-ropin' was half over, and still Hank hadn't showed up.

"He never told me he wasn't aimin' to ride," said Shorty Allen, foreman of the TY where Hank worked. "He rode off yesterday evenin' in his best bib-an'-tucker, goin' sparkin' again, I supposed, an' I ain't seen him since."

"He wasn't at the Woodley place," offered Smoky McGowan, "for I was there myownself."

Smoky didn't explain that he hadn't been there long. Nor that the reason was that the only way he'd been able to talk to blue-eyed Bessie Woodley was by standing on a barrel outside her window, rakin' a spur rowel across an old washboard and singing *Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight* until she had to open the window and warn him to shut up before her pa got mad and shot him. Smoky said he didn't believe her pa was that good of a shot, but if she would just lean out the window, he would try to make the smack good and loud, and maybe they'd find out. But she wouldn't lean.

Old Velvet Maguire shook the kinks out of his lass rope.

"I sure never did figger Hank McGowan had a yaller streak," he observed.

"He hasn't," said Smoky. "He'll ride."

"Then where's he at?"

Smoky shrugged. "Maybe I better see if I can find out," he said.

He found Bessie Woodley watching the roping from the makeshift grandstand of the Running W wagon in the midst of a bunch of ranch women cluckin' over the merits of tansy for the tizzick, how often to spank grandchildren, and bronc-ridin' accidents.

THEY all gave Smoky a smile and a knowing look when he spoke right up and asked Bessie if he could see her a minute —private. Bessie blushed and her blue eyes gave him sorter of a high-chinned look, but she clumb down out of the wagon and walked with him to the shade of a cottonwood tree down by the barbecue pits. She was dressed for the cowgals' pony race in plain faded overalls that Smoky thought was the purtiest he ever did see.

But he didn't say so. For once he didn't talk easy, but finally he looked her in the eye and come out with it.

"Bessie," he said, "just so there won't be no misunderstanding—I love you."

What kind of an answer he expected to that at such a time and place, Godfrey only knows. Fact was he didn't get any. You know how gals can act when they've kinder got their neck hair up about something. She never even let on she heard him.

"An' if I've got him figgered out right," he went on, earnest as a cowboy orderin' a new saddle, "so does Hank Wilby. This ain't a proper time to ask you which one of us you

favor—if either—though I don't mind admittin' I hope it's me. But if it turns out to be Hank, I wonder if you realize how you're shamin' him by makin' him back out of this here bronc-ridin'?"

"You men certainly believe in hanging together, don't you?" said Bessie, more high-chinned than ever.

"It's a blow to a man's self-respect," said Smoky.

"You mean his vanity!"

"All right then, his vanity. It's all hair off the same cowhide. Supposin' he swallers his shame an' don't ride because you asked him not to? He's goin' to figger that entitles him to your special favor. Then if it don't turn out that way, he's goin' to feel like you cheated him."

"And what makes you think it won't turn out that way, Mr. McGowan?" inquired Bessie, sweet as the unstirred sugar in a lemonade glass.

"I ain't thinkin'. I'm just—"

"So I notice!" All of a sudden the gal broke into a giggle.

The cowboy's dark cheeks flushed. "I don't see anything funny about it," he said stiffly.

"Being a man, you wouldn't!" snickered the gal. "Now, just so there won't be any misunderstanding: Are you (1) proposing to me on Hank Wilby's behalf, (2) on your own, or (3) is this just a free lecture on 'Woman's Place Is in the Home?'"

Slowly the cowboy's goddlemighty look gave way to a grin. "It looks like you've got the gate shut on me, gal," he said. "So I'll just crawl under the fence. All I want to know right now is: Where's Hank? And are you goin' to let him ride?"

"I haven't seen Hank since that night you—I mean that night I—you know what night I mean! And I don't know whether he's going to ride or not? I hope you both bust your darned necks!"

"Thanks," grinned Smoky. He gave her arm a little squeeze but didn't follow her back to the Running W wagon. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a tall, big-shouldered cowpuncher helping some late-arriving nester unhitch out at the feed yard. It looked like Hank Wilby. Smoky hurried out there, meeting the womenfolks and kids of the nester family on their way to watch the doin's. Hayfork Warren had a big family in more ways than one. "As big as ol' lady Warren" was a common saying in those parts. Her rosy-jawed daughter Verna was big, too, but in more of a limber-moving, well-shaped way. Mrs. Warren gave Smoky a smile, like the women always did. So did Verna, but it was kinder absent-minded. Her pleasant face wore an excited, eager look, at the same time tinged with anxiety.

Smoky howdied his hat to 'em and hurried on past. "Hiyah, Hank," he greeted Wilby. "Where in the hell have you been?"

"Teachin' your grandmother to milk ducks," grinned Hank. "What's itchin' you? Hopin' I wouldn't git here in time to beat you?"

Smoky looked plumb relieved. "So you're goin' to ride, huh?"

"Who the hell ever said I wasn't?"

THERE was four mighty rocky-lookin' broncs in the corral: two churn-headed sorrels, a bay and a dun. Somebody had managed to whitewash numbers on their hips without gittin' his head kicked off. Each man would ride two of 'em. Hank Wilby won the toss and chose to ride second. Old Velvet Maguire shook up four folded slips of paper in his hat.

"Here's hell, boys," he said. "Shut your eyes and grab!"

Both punchers waited until they had drawn two slips apiece before they unfolded them. Then they looked at each other and grinned.

"Oh, m'gawd!" groaned Smoky in mock dismay. "How's a man goin' to prove he's forked on a couple of ol' sorrel buggy horses?"

Hank's chuckle of satisfaction wasn't put on. "Mister," he chortled, "I'd rather ride forty bays an' duns than one of them ol' sorrels! Back in Texas I knowed a feller that clumb on one of them ol' sunburnt churn-heads the day after Christmas an' it throwed him on New Year's!"

"Well, this ain't Christmas in Texas," drawled old Velvet Maguire, "but it soon will be if you windy-guts don't git started saddlin' up. The crowd's a-waitin'!"

With the aid of a snubber and one helper afoot, Smoky got his first sorrel saddled without much trouble. Around the open flat they were using for an arena, folks quit talkin' and begun to crowd in closer. Some of the womenfolks clumb into wagons, but Smoky saw one climb out and start edging her slim figger around towards the corral. Either she aimed to watch the riding close or else clear out and not watch it at all. Smoky didn't have time to see which.

Easy and smooth and carefree-like, he stepped across the saddle.

"Five dollars I don't lose my hat, Hank!" he grinned.

"Took!" shouted Hank.

"Turn him loose!" squalled Smoky.

Old Velvet Maguire yanked the gunny-sack blindfold off the sorrel and stepped back. With his back humped, his tail ducked and his head down, the sorrel just stood there. Smoky gigged him lightly and flicked his flank with the quirt. For three rough, stiff-legged crow-hops the sorrel bucked, then sulled again, and started wringing his tail like he aimed to lay down. His head was so low that his nose blowed dust.

"Hitch him to a buggy!" some ol' cowboy squalled.

So far Smoky had set up there as wary as a wolf. Now he leaned forward a little and thumbed the bronc between his shoulder blades. What happened then ain't in the book. That sorrel viewed his belly and kicked at the the moon.

SOMEWHERE up in there was a saddle with a man in it—but not the way he wanted to be. In the hundredth of a second that he was caught leaning forward, Smoky had lost his balance by about an inch, and never found no chance to get it back. With every jump his pants seat found that saddle just a leetle harder to locate. His hat was still on, but mighty crooked. To folks that never rode a bronc it pro'bly looked like a ride. But Smoky knowed better, and so did the tight-lipped gal watching from up on the corral fence.

"Oh, Smoky!" she gasped. "He's got you throwed!"

Smoky never heard her—and the next jump sheared him loose. Nobody but Smoky ever knowed how hard he landed. He got up with a wild cowboy squall, yanked off his hat and waved it at the crowd, then hitched up his pants and strolled to the fence.

"Back in Texas," grinned Hank Wilby, "the hat comes off an' the man stays on!"

Hank's first mount was the bay. It was a fast, razzle-dazzle bucker of the style that uncocks quick but don't last long. Maybe Hank didn't look as smooth as rabbit fur, swaying around up there with his quirt a-flyin' and his mouth wide open, but he kept his pants glued to the leather. In less than a minute he had that little bay ready to sell for a pet. When he stepped off everybody knowed it was a ride.

Smoky's second sorrel didn't sull. He exploded straight up from taw, bucking high and hard. Set for it this time, Smoky rode him smooth and sure. Even when the sorrel suddenly changed tactics and let in to whirligig, Smoky found time between spurring and quirting him to slap the bronc's ears with his hat. After nearly a minute it begun to look like the sorrel was through.

"Ride him to the gate," shouted Velvet Maguire, as head judge. "If he don't buck no more you've made your ride!"

Smoky headed the sorrel for the gate as docile as a pet mule. Then not 30 feet from where Bessie Woodley sat perched on the fence, he leaned forward and thumbed him. This time the sorrel got mad. He bucked high and mean and came down hard, and he kept it up. Those close enough could see a whitish tinge around Smoky's gills, and they knowed he was takin' punishment. But every time the bronc slacked off, Smoky thumbed him again; and every time he thumbed him the sorrel come unbuckled worse than ever.

IT MUST have been a full five minutes Smoky rode him, leg-free and fancy. The crowd was purt' near havin' fits of plain admiration, and Hank was tryin' to tell Old Lady Warren that was the way they rode 'em back in Texas, when the bronc suddenly stopped.

"He's rode," said Velvet Maguire. But he wasn't. This time Smoky didn't thumb him. But just an inch before he started to climb off, the sorrel side-bucked about twenty feet—and saved him the trouble.

Smoky started to pick up his hat with his right hand, then changed to his left, put the sombrero on and got up looking kinder white and mighty sheepish.

"Oh, m'gawd!" he grinned at Hank. "Throwed twice in a row, an' ever-body lookin'! You won't have to straddle that ol' dun after all, the money's yours!"

"Huh?" said Hank. "Oh, you mean the money! Hell, this was a two-saddle match, wasn't it? 'Course I'll ride him! Look who's here to watch me!" He jerked his head towards the fence, but Smoky didn't look.

It was the long-legged dun, after all, that turned out to be the man-killer. As he hollered "Turn 'im a-loose!" Hank threw up his left hand, with the quirt in it, as if to wave to somebody—and there it stuck. The dun

bucked low-headed, his back in a crescent, but plenty high. Hank Wilby said afterwards that from way up where he was, Smoky McGowan didn't look no bigger than a midget. Hank's left arm was still froze purt' near straight up in the air like he had hold of a piece of the sky and couldn't let loose.

Smoky McGowan had rode enough broncs to know how a man sometimes gits rattled and his nerves stiffen up and he don't give any with the horse's motion, and the next thing he knows he's throwed. So he knew what ailed Hank. Having just been throwed twice hisownself, you'd think he'd have been kinder gratified at the chance to see old Hank take the same medicine.

Instead, when he heard Hank say, "Smoky, I'm throwed!" he spoke right back at him quiet but sharp.

"Quirt him, Hank!"

Just them three words, but Hank heard 'em and it fetched him out of his daze. Down came his arm with a slash of the quirt, and from then on he made a ride. It would have finished in a blaze of glory if the dun hadn't overreached hisself trying to bite off his own tail and gone on over in a somersault. Hank flew free of the saddle, but the dun's rump hit him, and when the horse got up, big ol' Hank just laid there. It looked like he wasn't even breathing.

Smoky got to him and raised his head with with his left arm. Then, like always when there's an accident, a lot of folks come crowding around, and amongst them was blue-eyed Bessie Woodley and Hayfork Warren's big blonde daughter Verna, never even noticing that they bumped into each other.

"Let's carry him to the shade, Smoky," said a cowpuncher, starting to lift his feet.

Smoky saw Bessie Woodley standing there and he looked kinder funny. He didn't make a move to help lift Hank.

"You better take him, Shorty," he said to Hank's boss.

But somebody else got there ahead of Shorty Allen.

"It's just the wind knocked out of him," said Smoky.

"Oh, I hope so!" cried Bessie Woodley. "It was a wonderful ride!"

HANK'S eyes batted half open, then wide open when he saw that the strong arms carrying him at the head end was those of a women.

"Oh, m'gawd!" he gasped. "Stand me up!"

"You rode him, Hank!" Verna proclaimed it to the world. "He fell with you, but he never throwed you!"

When they stood him up, he kinder wobbled, so the big blonde gal put her arm around him to steady him and he put his around her.

"You're the best darn bronc-rider that ever was born, Hank!" said Verna.

Smoky spoke close to Bessie Woodley's ear in a low, sorter humorous tone: "She seems to like the way he rode, don't she?"

"He didn't ride a darn bit better than you did!" Bessie said it like it was her that had learnt him.

"Only I got throwed—twice!"

"I don't care if you did! You—you nearly made me forget I was so scared you'd get hurt."

"Why was you scared?" asked Smoky, kinder husky in the goozlem.

She didn't answer him, but when he sneaked his right arm around her she didn't pull away very quickly.

"Which just goes to prove," said Smoky, as they moved over to the fence to make room for the kids' calf-ridin', "that bronc-ridin' don't have nothin' to do with love, one way or the other."

Bessie went high-chinned again all of a sudden. "I don't know what you mean!" she prissed.

"Yes, you do, Bessie Bright-Eyes," said Smoky. "Look at me!"

But she wouldn't. "I warned you," she said purty miffy, "that if you rode these man-killers today you needn't come around *me* any more! And I meant it!"

Smoky couldn't get a look at her eyes to see whether she was just twistin' his tail a little like women have sometimes got to do to bring their men to taw, or whether she sure enough meant to cut him loose. Then them blue eyes looked up at him and he saw the twinkle.

"Only you *didn't ride* them!" she giggled.

Giggle or not, Smoky seemed to know that now was the time. With everybody watchin' the calf-ridin' it wasn't any trouble at all to reach his left arm around her and kiss her. He never had felt so good in his life as when she kissed him back. It even beat ridin'.

He was kinder glad she didn't notice that he helt her with only one arm. Time enough to let her find out the other one was busted, he figgered, after a few more words about love.

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THE NORTHERN approach to Rockaway Pass was a steady, steam-eating grind and by the time the four-car, narrow-gauge freight train topped out at Kicking Horse, the little Simcoe engine up ahead was glad to pull up at the water tower and replenish the depleted contents of its tender tank.

Back in the caboose the brakeman broke off talking to the girl in grey and hurried out as the engine whistled the stop. The girl stood up, moved over to a small, dusty window and stood there, looking out across the lonely sage hills of the high Nevada Desert. Guardedly, Luke Fenimore watched her.

She was fairly tall, with an easy, erect grace. Her hair was ebon black, her eyes a clear, flawless grey, a contrast as startling as it was effective. There was a certain warmth about her mouth and chin which softened and shaded her profile just enough to balance the high, bright pride reflected there. She was definitely the handsomest girl Luke Fenimore had ever seen and it was hard to keep from watching her. That she was conscious of Luke's scrutiny and resented it, showed when she turned her head abruptly and faced him fully, a cold disdain coming into her eyes.

Luke started a trifle guiltily, then shrugged, touching his hat. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said gravely, "but beauty was made to be looked at. I meant no offense."

He turned and started toward the rear platform of the caboose. Before he reached there, however, three men came pushing in. They

DESERT STEEL

BY L. P. HOLMES

HERE BEGINS a rousing serial of the great rail-laying days of the West when men toiled and fought so that the shining steel might reach its destination.

were a rough, unkempt-looking trio and Luke, drawing on the wisdom of past observation, classed them as mule-skinners. He paused, waiting for them to move aside and let him pass. But they did not move aside. Instead they fanned out, three abreast, effectively blocking off the little car.

A thread of hard alertness ran through Luke Fenimore, sharpening and narrowing his eyes, bringing him up on slightly spread feet, balanced and ready. "Looking for somebody?" he rapped curtly.

"Yeah," answered the one in the middle over an outthrust, belligerent jaw, "yeah, we are. Looking for Fenimore."

"You've found him. So now?"

"Why," said the fellow, "this is where you get off. You've changed your mind. You're not going on to Cold Creek. You're getting off here and hitting the sage back to Garnet. When you get there you can let your conscience be your guide just so long as it points you east, west or north. But not south again—definitely not south."

A faintly purring note came into Luke Fenimore's voice. "And if I decide not to get off?"

The twist of the fellow's lips was more leer than smile. "Then me and these other two boys aim to make up your mind for you. Come on, you're getting off!"

Luke Fenimore was thirty-two. Behind him lay better than a dozen years of experience in the ways of tough camps and tough men. Contact with such elements had toughened him, inevitably. It had also taught him much. One such lesson was that when trouble or conflict loomed and had to be faced, the safest course and the one most apt to pay off was to meet that trouble right on the nose. Attack, as overwhelming as possible, plus surprise was far better than any defense. Also he had learned that when the odds were three to one, only a fool was held down by any fancy rules. A smart man sought to smash and disable by any means at hand.

So now he loosened his shoulders with a slight shrug and murmured, "If I must, I must."

A little behind Luke and to his right, on the bench which ran along the side of the caboose, rested his sum total of baggage—a small, scuffed, use-stained old canvas sided grip sack. It looked innocent enough and only Luke knew that tucked deep within it, right against the very bottom of it, were several pounds of hard, unyielding metal in the shape of a pair of .45 Colts, holstered and wrapped around by cartridge-studded belts, plus a full, unbroken box of ammunition.

Luke's first move in reaching for his gripsack was disarming and innocent enough. His next was savage and explosive. For with the half-turn of his body and the long stretch of his arm as leverage, he brought the gripsack forward in a half-sweep, half-throw and let it fly, hurtling, squarely into the face of the spokesman of the three. The crunch of the impact was solid, wicked. The fellow went over backward as though hit with a sledge-hammer. The odds had been cut down by a third.

Luke let the impetus of the throw carry him forward and he snapped a left fist into the face of the second rough before the startled fellow could get his guard up. It wasn't hard enough to drop the man, but it did tip his head back and held him floundering for a vital moment. And in that moment Luke let his right fist go with all he had. The fellow's jaw was a fair and open target and Luke found it squarely. The solid shock of the blow told Luke that the odds were even now.

But there was a price to be paid, for the first second of surprise was gone and his back was to the third rough. Luke dropped his head, wrapping his arms about it as he whirled. And barely in time, for a pair of knotty fists was clubbing at him. The protective curtain of his arms helped Luke some, but not too much. One of those fists crashed home under Luke's left ear and another thudded against the side of his neck, blows that hurt and shook him up badly.

LUKE rushed his man, still crouched, still covering up. The fellow met him, spewing fury. The heavy fists beat down on the base of Luke's neck, trying to rabbit punch him. Luke whipped his arms about the fellow's waist, got the point of his shoulder in the fellow's stomach, half lifted him from the floor and carried him with a crash up against the side of the caboose. And as that barrier abruptly stopped the fellow's backward movement, Luke rolled his hunched right shoulder forward as hard as he could.

It was like a solid punch in the solar plexus and it wrung a gasp from Luke's final opponent. Luke stepped back just far enough to clear his hands, ripped two blows into the same spot his shoulder had punished. These wallops brought a groan instead of a gasp and as the fellow dropped his guard to cover his

suffering mid-riff, Luke brought his right up almost from the floor. Again he felt the angle of a jaw under his ridged knuckles, again he felt the solid shock of the punch run up his arm. He stepped back and let the fellow fall.

It had been just a matter of seconds from the first to the last, but they had been savage, explosive seconds of sustained effort that took much out of a man. Luke was panting gustily as he stood for a moment looking over the trio. His next move was to retrieve his gripsack. After which, one by one he dragged the three roughs out onto the rear platform of the caboose and tumbled them down into the sage by the right-of-way. The one he had hit with the gripsack was still out cold. The other two were coming back, but not far enough to put up any argument over their none too gentle ejection. Luke had just finished getting rid of the last of them when the brakeman came back to the caboose to stare in amazement.

"What's been going on here?" he demanded.

Luke shrugged. "Those three prize ones climbed into the caboose playing with the idea of throwing me off. Just why, I can only guess at. I sort of changed their minds for them."

The brakeman looked them over with callous eye, then turned his hands up. "So that's the reason they been hanging around here at Kicking Horse for the past week! Every time we stopped here for water on the southbound run they'd come out of the sage and take a look in the caboose. All the time it was you they were looking for."

"It would seem so," Luke murmured. "Probably they'll stop looking now."

Up ahead the Simcoe sent the wail of its whistle echoing across the lonely sage. The couplings took up with a jerk and the wheels began to turn. The brakeman hopped nimbly on. "I've seen that guy with the bushy eyebrows and the crooked nose skinning a freight outfit for Jack Fargo. What would Fargo be having against you?"

"I wouldn't know," said Luke. "I don't even know the gentleman."

The brakeman seemed to cogitate for a moment, then jerked his head back toward the spot where one man still lay prone while the two others were just staggering to their feet.

"After that, you probably will. Jack Fargo was never bashful about walkin' down the middle of the street with big, wide steps. Well, it's none of my pie."

With this the brakeman went on into the caboose with the obvious intention of taking up his conversation with the girl again. In which he was doomed to disappointment, for the girl's mood was one of thoughtful, reserved preoccupation and the brakie soon took the hint, after which he did considerable disgruntled staring at Luke Fenimore, as though he blamed Luke for it all.

As for Luke, he sat quietly, also immersed

in his own thoughts, from time to time, absently fingering the side of his neck where the darkness of a bruise was beginning to take shape. Now it was the girl who several times stole guarded glances at the quietly thoughtful man at the far end of the caboose. But presently, when Luke stirred and reached for his pipe, she swung her eyes quickly away and did not look at him again.

THE RAIL-END town of Cold Creek was sprawling, raw-boarded and ugly. Luke Fenimore was neither impressed nor disappointed at what he saw. For in his time he had seen a lot of rough construction camp towns and there was a certain sameness to all of them. Few ever attained any permanence. They grew quickly, they died quickly. Beauty was never in any of them.

The girl in grey left the caboose ahead of Luke and when Luke stepped down from the caboose platform it was to find the brakie staring after her as she swung lithely away. "There ought," mumbled the brakie, "to be a law agin a girl as pretty as her moving through a world of lonely men. I dunno what Bart Runnell ever did to have such luck."

"I wouldn't know about that," said Luke drily. "But maybe you might be able to tell me where to locate Ma Megarry's boarding house."

"Sure," said the brakie. "Only two-story building on the left side of the street, about halfway up."

A pale, thin sunlight was beginning to work timidly through the midday overcast. The early spring air still had a bite to it, raw with the breath of late departed winter. In some of the hollows in the rolling hills beyond town, a faint powdering of snow still clung.

Half a dozen big freight outfits were pulled up beside the railroad tracks and from them men were laboriously unloading heavy, fat, grey lead ingots, which they stacked in orderly rows. Still further along, beyond the southern edge of town, were several huge corrals and in them the shifting, living mass of scores of mules. Around the corrals empty freight wagons loomed, like clumsy, uncouth giants at rest. All these things Luke Fenimore took in with a speculative sweep of his eyes, before heading uptown.

He found the boarding house without difficulty and when he entered was faced by a brawny Irish woman with twinkling eyes and a rich, slurring brogue who said, "I'm Ma Megarry. You were wishing lodgings, maybe, mister?"

"If you have them," nodded Luke. "Joe Keller recommended your place, Mrs. Megarry. My name is Fenimore, Luke Fenimore."

"A friend of Joe's is a friend of mine. Come along."

The second-story room was small, but it was neat and clean. "Dinner's been over near an hour, Luke Fenimore," said Ma Megarry. "But if you've missed yours, it's likely that a bite can be found in the kitchen."

Luke shook his head, smiling. "No thanks. I may have a chore on my hands that comes out best on an empty stomach."

Ma Megarry's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Humpth! 'Tis a fight you're after anticipatin'. And why would that be?"

"I'm the new grade superintendent," said Luke quietly. "I had a long talk with John Guthrie at Garnet and he told me I might bump into a little trouble."

"So!" exclaimed Ma Megarry. "They've finally got around to putting a man in place of that drunken, worthless Bole Ives, eh? 'Tis high time, so it is. But you'll not be goin' down to those bunkhouses alone, Luke Fenimore. 'Tis my own puny son who will be going with you."

Before Luke could protest, she had sent a call echoing through the building, to which there was rumbling reply and soon the "puny" son came into Luke's room. He was a young giant with tremendous shoulders, arms like tree limbs and a hand so huge it fairly swallowed Luke's own sinewy fist as Ma Megarry said, "Johnny, shake hands with Mr. Fenimore, who is replacing Bole Ives. Mr. Fenimore is going down to the bunkhouses to lay the law down to those worthless loafers. Do you go along with him and see that they do not gang him."

Johnny Megarry said, "Hah! This is the best news I've heard since the word got around that Bole Ives was through. It is happy I am to know you, Mr. Fenimore."

And then Johnny Megarry stepped back and gave Luke a long, measuring glance, and nodded in silent approval at what he saw.

Luke stood just a shade under six feet. His waist and hips were narrow and compact, but under his short, fleece-lined coat and blue woolen shirt there was depth and breadth to his chest and shoulders. His features were rugged, his skin a weathered brown, with a

firm, tough, well scrubbed look to it. Halfway between the line of his vigorous, slightly unruly brown hair and his left eyebrow there was a shadow of an old scar, with another of the same at the corner of his long, firm lips. His eyes were a cool, clear blue which saw much, yet revealed little, except perhaps a faint, almost sardonic skepticism.

JOHNNY Megarry nodded again and said, "I'll be glad to take you down and introduce you to the boys, Mr. Fenimore. And I'd like to say right now that aside from one or two, maybe, they're not a bad bunch, that grade gang. 'Tis the gang I work in myself, so I know them well. This mite of trouble is not their fault. It's just that of late there's been no head or tail to things, what with Bole Ives drinkin' and sulkin', and with Cob Ogard, the foreman, sore over his friend Ives being on the way out. Then Bart Runnell, the overall construction super, he's been away on some kind of business and there just seemed to be nobody who really knows what is which. You know what that does to a gang."

Luke nodded. "Let's get down there," he said crisply.

The bunkhouses and cook shacks for the construction gangs stood at the edge of town by the railroad track. Johnny Megarry led the way into the first bunkhouse. The air was thick with tobacco smoke. Men lolled on bunks, some sleeping, others talking and arguing idly back and forth. Some were playing poker and other card games at tables scattered up and down the long room between the rows of bunks. The moment he entered the place, Luke Fenimore could sense the surliness and unrest. It was like decay of some sort. When you knew the moods of men, you could fairly smell the disaffection of a construction crew.

On a bunk near the door a man was holding forth to a number of listeners. His discourse at the moment was a growling, profane de-
meet Luke Fennimore, our new grade super.
intendent of the Desert and Central Railroad. He broke off abruptly as Luke and Johnny Megarry came in. All along the bunkhouse heads were lifted and turned and Luke felt the impact of many eyes.

Johnny Megarry lifted his voice. "Boys, meet Luke Fenimore, our new grade super, He's taking the place of Bole Ives."

A stir ran through the place, a quickening interest, a measuring and judging. The man who had been cursing John Guthrie growled, in a voice which reached every corner of the room, "So this would be the one, eh? Well, I for one can't see that there's enough of him to fill the boots of Bole Ives. Not near enough!"

Luke's eyes had narrowed. Now the blue of them chilled and chilled until they took on the tint of glacier ice. He said curtly, "And just who are you, my bucko friend?"

"The name is Ogard, Cob Ogard. I'm the foreman of this—"

"You were the foreman," cut in Luke bluntly. "But no longer. You're through—fired!"

The place went dead still. Cob Ogard stared, his black eyes filming over with a reddish glint. He came to his feet, stocky, thick, powerful, with a bullet head. "There is not enough man in you to fire me," he exploded.

Luke shrugged. "We'll see. For some time now I've been hiring and firing tougher buckos than you'll ever be. But I know the signs. You won't be satisfied until I prove it. Step outside!"

"Ha!" barked Ogard. "Ha! I'll break you in half!"

Johnny Megarry was worried. As Luke led the way outside Johnny touched his arm. "He's a bad one, Mr. Fenimore. Anything goes with Cob. He'll wreck you complete if he can. If he gets you down he'll put the boots to you!"

"I've met his kind before, Johnny. They're tough if you fight them their way, not so tough when you don't. He might have friends wanting to buy in. You can keep them off my back."

"I'll keep them off," vowed Johnny.

THE WORD spread with almost mysterious speed. Bunkhouses emptied to the last man and they came crowding around, avid as wolves. The word reached the ears of Alec Craigie and Casey O'Keefe, crew of the little Simcoe locomotive. It reached uptown and from a saloon, half drunk, lurched Bole Ives, a big, loose-mouthed man.

Luke Fenimore took off his coat and hat, tossed them to Johnny Megarry. He tightened the belt about his lean, hard-packed midriff another notch, then turned on Ogard. Abruptly he was no longer a quiet, faintly smiling man with a certain remoteness about him. Now he was like a panther, soft-stepping, prowling, committed to a cold, remorseless purpose.

He did not wait for Ogard to move in on him. Instead Luke slithered forward and snapped that jarring left into Ogard's face. There was more to the punch than there seemed, for it snapped Ogard's head back and brought a smear of crimson to his lips. It also set Ogard beserk, which it was calculated to do. Ogard charged, fingers spread and clawing, aiming to get in close, get a grip and wrestle his man down.

Luke side-stepped and brought his right hand across with a hard, driving roll of his shoulder behind the blow. His target was the nerve on the side of the neck under the ear and his hard-ridged knuckles found it fairly. Ogard went sprawling, numbed and shaken.

He got up slowly, shaking his head, as though bewildered over what had happened to him. He charged again and took that straight left twice without showing any ability at defense. Which was all that Luke wanted to know. Cob Ogard was a typical rough and tumble fighter, whose forte was to get in close where he could rip and tear and maul, where he could gouge and wrestle, get his man down so he could choke and knee and batter, and put the boots to him.

Bole Ives, big but gross, had pushed his way to the inner circle of the crowd. Somebody had told him that this lean, solid-shouldered stranger was the man who was taking over his job. So now Bole Ives spat a string of oaths. "Get him, Cob, get him! Kick his ribs in. I want a swing at him, myself!"

He took a step closer, but found the huge bulk of Johnny Megarry barring his way. "'Tis a fair fight between the two of them," said Johnny. "You'll not be botherin'."

That slashing left hand that seemed always in his face maddened Cobb Ogard completely. His rushes grew wilder, clumsier, his guard more open. And presently Luke nailed him with that blasting right again. This time it was the point of Ogard's jaw Luke aimed for and found, and Ogard dropped on his face.

He got up slowly, dazed and hurt, and Luke went after him savagely. This wasn't just a lesson to Ogard. This was a lesson for every man in the grade gang. It was part of a psychology which Luke Fenimore had learned long ago, back along the years of his rough and tough apprenticeship in the ways of construction crews and the men who made up those crews. This was a lesson in just who was boss.

Luke gave Ogard no chance to find either mental or physical balance again. His fists, hard and merciless, winged in like projectiles from a gun. They drove Cob Ogard back and back, slowly at first, then faster and faster. And then, presently, Ogard was down again, and this time he didn't get up. The fight was over. It had been quick, it had been one-sided, and it was finished.

For a moment Luke watched his man, then he turned, his glance running over the stunned and silent crowd. His smile was hard, but not unfriendly. "Well, you terriers, this was what you wanted to see, wasn't it? A fight? All right, that is over and done with. But we got a real, worthwhile fight ahead, which we'll fight together. We got a railroad to finish building, 45 miles of it. We got just 34 days to do it in. There are some who'll say it can't be done. They're wrong. It can be done. And we are going to do it!

"Starting tomorrow morning, Johnny Megarry is the new foreman of the grading gang. Starting tomorrow morning we move dirt. We move it like it was never moved before. We got a railroad to build, fellas. That's all. I'll meet you on the job in the morning."

They liked it. Theirs was a simple, fundamental creed. Their work was physical, so it was natural that their judgment of a man should be mainly physical. Courage, first of all. Then strength, ability, physical toughness. They loved a fighter and a leader. Here they had both.

Over to one side Alec Cragie, engineer of the little Simcoe locomotive, turned to Casey O'Keefe, his fireman. "I heard John Guthrie tell Joe Keller that he was bringing in a trouble-shooter to clear things up in the grading gang. Looks like he found one."

THE CABIN achieved a quiet dignity by standing somewhat apart from the rest of the town. Just beyond it the slope of the hills began to lift. Luke Fenimore was thoughtful as he came up to it.

It was mid-afternoon now and the fight with Cob Ogard was history by some three hours. Accompanied by Johnny Megarry, Luke had gone back to the boarding house where he had cleaned up, had a bite to eat in the kitchen, then gone to his room to smoke and think and loaf a bit. Then he had sought out Johnny and asked, "Where will I find this fellow Dick Leslie, the surveyor boss and engineer?"

Johnny had pointed out the cabin, and then said, a trifle awkwardly, "I'll do my best for

you as foreman, Mr. Fenimore, though I'm wonderin' why you picked me to replace Cob Ogard."

At which Luke had laughed softly. "Three reasons, Johnny. One because there's a lot of work in that big carcass of yours. Second, because you had the situation figured right and were willing to speak up in defense of the men. Third, because I like you. And Johnny—from here on out, drop the 'Mister.' Make it straight Luke. I'm going to put a lot of weight on you, fella."

Johnny squared his huge shoulders. "I'll carry it," he promised simply.

So now some things had been cleared up and straightened out. But it was well to know what kind of country lay ahead, and if anyone could tell him that, Luke figured it would be this fellow, Dick Leslie, the surveyor boss and construction engineer.

Luke knocked at the cabin door and a moment later was standing startled, but very still. For the door was opened by the girl who had ridden in the caboose with him from Garnet, the girl in grey. She was in gingham now, spick and span. She looked younger, more girlish.

Luke fumbled for his hat. "I understood that Dick Leslie lived here," he said. "I wanted to talk to him, on railroad business. I'm Luke Fenimore, the new grade super."

She nodded, entirely matter-of-fact. "Won't you come in? I'll call Dick."

At her call a slender young fellow in laced boots, corduroy trousers and grey flannel shirt came in. His face was intellectual, sensitive, with a strange grimness about the mouth. There were ink stains on his fingers and he was carrying a draughtman's pencil.

"This is Mr. Fenimore, Dick," said the girl. "He's taken the place of Bole Ives, so he says. And he wants to talk to you."

Dick Leslie's smile was quick and genuine

as he put out his hand. "Glad to know you, Fenimore. Mr. Guthrie told me he was going to replace Ives. High time, too. Er—this is my sister, Dale."

Luke met the impersonal reserve of the girl's glance, bowed slightly and murmured, "My very good fortune, Miss Leslie." He turned to Dick Leslie and said, "Hope I'm not bothering you too much. But there are some angles of the job I'd like to talk over."

"Sure," was the hearty reply. "Glad you dropped in. I was just checking over some of my figures. Come on into the cubby where I work while I'm home."

It was a small room, with a draughting table, a rack of prints, a stool and a chair. Dick Leslie perched on the stool, waved Luke to the chair. "Shoot!"

"First, what's ahead?" asked Luke. "Country, I mean."

DICK Leslie spread a piece of paper and the pencil in his practiced fingers flew. "Here is Cold Creek and here is Castle Mountain. The right-of-way leads along the valley of the Castle River. We'll have to cross the river four times. Ninety-five per cent of the time the Castle River is just a spread of alkali-whitened rocks and gravel. The rest of the time it's anything from a little trickle of dirty water to a hell-raising, wild-eyed flood. So, while keeping our gradients to a minimum, we must allow enough to be sure we'll be above the maximum flood water that may come down Castle River . . . ."

Dick Leslie talked and Luke Fenimore listened, occasionally dropping in a shrewd question here and there. And Luke found himself liking young Leslie for his sincere enthusiasm and really excellent grasp of the job. Yet toward the end Dick Leslie sobered and shrugged. "All of which doesn't mean a damn thing, of course, unless we can beat that subsidy deadline. You knew of that, of course, Fenimore?"

"A little," Luke admitted. "I'd like to know more. John Guthrie mentioned it to me. Quite a chunk of money at stake, I understand."

"Just a cool quarter of a million," said Leslie. "The State voted the subsidy, but with this string attached. To claim that subsidy we have to put a train inside the city limits of Castle Mountain by midnight, April 30th. The men who are backing our little railroad are mine owners in Castle Mountain. Henry Shard, Frank Ames and Curtis Leffingwell. They've borrowed to the hilt against that subsidy and if we don't win it for them the roof will fall in. I wonder if you have been computing time and distance?"

Luke nodded. "Forty-five miles in 34 days. Roughly a mile and a third of steel a day to go down. No time to fool around, of course.

But it can be done. I've been on jobs where standard-gauge steel went down faster than that. This layout is narrow gauge, which means handling 35-pound steel against 90- or a 100-pound. Roughly we'll be grading for a three-foot track instead of a five-foot. That same two-foot margin holds good on bridges, culverts and most of it figures in on side clearance."

"Granted," said Dick Leslie. "There would be no cause to run a temperature of worry if we had everything we need. But—right now in the way of rolling stock we got one Simcoe engine. We got half a dozen box cars and a dozen flats. The Simcoe is worked to death. It has to haul lead pigs out to Garnet on the the main line and bring back not only all the supplies we need, but what Castle Mountain and the mines need, as well.

"Then there's Jack Fargo, whose freight wagons fill in the gap between here and Castle Mountain. Fargo has close to 50 wagons on the road all the time, going and coming. He's got between five and six hundred mules. Those mules eat hay and we have to haul that hay in from Garnet. Alec Craigie and Casey O'Keefe have done wonders keeping the Simcoe rolling, but we can't count on it forever. Finally, there's steel."

Something in the way Dick Leslie said that made Luke's head come up. "What about steel?" he asked sharply.

Leslie shrugged. "We may run short of it."

Luke hit his feet, took a short turn up and down the room. His voice went hard, almost harsh. "What kind of a layout is this Desert and Central anyhow. I knew there was a mess in the grade gang that had to be straightened out. Which has been done. I knew there were several other angles held together, you might say, with a shoe string. But I didn't know they were trying to build a road without steel. The payoff to everything is steel. You can figure a temporary solution to about everything else. But steel you must have! What's the answer?"

Dick Leslie shook a reluctant head. "I'm not sure enough to supply the whole answer. But it seems the mills are going to be a little slow on delivery. Right now we're plenty short. Bart Runnell, our construction super, is away, trying to line up some second-hand steel. Let's hope he gets it."

Luke took another turn or two across the little room, then with a shrug dropped back into his chair. "Don't know why I should worry about steel," he growled, as though to himself. "My job is to build grade and I'll see that that is done."

WHILE they'd talked, the afternoon had run away. Now the gloom of early evening was outside and lights went on in the other rooms of the cabin. And then Dale Leslie was in the doorway, saying, "You two have talked enough to build a thousand miles of railroad. Now, supper is ready."

Luke jumped up, reaching for his hat. "Good Lord! I had no idea—! Miss Leslie, I'm begging your pardon. Why didn't you throw me out, long ago?"

For the first time the cool reserve she had displayed softened just a trifle. The faintest of smiles touched her lips. "I've set a place for you, too. It is a relief to have someone around that Dick can talk job to, someone who understands what he's driving at. Which I, frankly, do not. Though I listen as best I can, for I know how much it means to Dick."

"It's my first big job," said Dick Leslie simply. "I've got to get it right. My whole future can depend on how I handle it."

It was the pleasantest meal Luke Fenimore had sat down to in a long, long time. Behind him lay a succession of hotels, hash houses, boarding houses and construction camp cook shacks. Here, in this neat little cabin, was white napery, gleaming dinner ware. Here were well bred gentlefolk.

By no slightest sign did Luke show how acutely conscious he was of the girl who sat across the table from him. The light of the hanging lamp built up rich, metallic glints in her hair, laid soft shadows about her chin and throat. Her every move was smooth grace, her voice a melody in the ears of a lonely man. Luke remembered how she caught him watching her in the caboose and the cool disdain she had shown in return. He did not want to risk that disdain again. So careful was he of this, he unconsciously laid around him a shell of remoteness which caused both of the Leslies to throw wondering glances at him.

Through the early night the bay of a whistle sounded. "There's Alec Craigie and Casey O'Keefe back from Garnet again," exclaimed Dick Leslie. "Workingest engine crew in the

"Ogard," said Luke, "is fired. He stays fired!" The room went quiet.

world, those two. To hear them rawhide each other you'd think they were always on the brink of mortal combat. But start a fight with one and you have both on your neck. Wonder if they bring any news from Bart, Sis?"

Luke, recalling the remark made by the brakeman on arriving at Cold Creek, glanced at Dale Leslie. Her head was up, her eyes shining. She seemed to be listening.

Something went out of the evening for Luke Fenimore, right then and there. The brakie had mentioned her along with this Bart Runnell. Now, when her brother spoke of this same Bart Runnell, the girl fairly glowed. A hint of that sardonic skepticism came back into Luke's eyes, as though in mockery at some momentary sentimental weakness of his own. He wished he were back in his own room, alone. It was the proper place for a lone wolf to be, in his own den.

Luke was glad when the meal was finished, a few minutes later. He said, "There's an old saying about eating and running, Miss Leslie. But I've things to do. It was very generous of you to have me to supper. It meant—more than you imagine. And I—"

Luke broke off, abruptly aware that she wasn't even listening, at least not to him. For there was the sound of quick approaching steps outside and her eyes were on the door, bright and eager. She fairly flew to answer the knock and her voice was throaty as she cried, "Bart!"

THIS fellow Bart Runnell was a big man with square shoulders. He seemed to fill the doorway as he stood there, holding the girl's hands in both of his while he looked down at her, saying, "Dale! Girl, you look good to me!"

Luke was bleak and restless. He wanted to get out of here. But now Bart Runnell was looking across the room saying, "Hi, Dick! How are all the little survey stakes?"

"They're all right," answered Dick Leslie. "How about that Grasshopper steel?"

"No luck. Somebody beat us to it."

"That," said Dick slowly, "is bad."

Runnell shrugged. "Breaks of the game. Second-hand steel is miserable stuff to handle, anyhow."

"Second-hand steel is so much better than no steel at all, it isn't even funny," said Dick Leslie grimly. "Where do we go from here?"

Runnell shrugged again. "That's Guthrie's worry. He's the big boss. Don't believe I've met your friend."

Dick said, "Shake hands with Luke Fenimore. He's taking over the grade crew. Fenimore, this is Bart Runnell."

There was a bold, almost masterful handsomeness to Bart Runnell. His glance bored Luke as they struck hands. "Heard about you, Fenimore," he said. "Alec Craigie was telling me about your little ruckus with Cob Ogard. You'll reconsider there, of course. About firing Ogard, I mean. Cob has his faults, but he's too good a man to let go. No, we won't be firing Ogard."

"Ogard," said Luke, "is fired. He stays fired!"

The room went quiet. It was as though flint had struck steel. "Maybe," said Bart Runnell, a heavy note coming into his tone, "maybe you haven't got all the picture, Fenimore, being a stranger. It happens that I'm superintendent over all construction on this job, and you gang bosses are directly responsible to me. And, furthermore, I'm saying that you're not firing—"

"I'm responsible," cut in Luke bluntly, "to John Guthrie, nobody else. And I'll run my gang my way. That is the understanding I had with Guthrie when I took the job. That's the way it will be. Dick, Miss Leslie, I'll be running along. Thanks again for your hospitality."

As he stepped past Runnell to the door, Luke flashed a quick glance at Dick Leslie, another at the girl. Dick looked troubled, but his good night was pleasant and friendly. There was a faint flush in the girl's cheeks, however, and her eyes were flashing. Her nod was barely perceptible.

As the door closed behind him and Luke started off through the night, he muttered, "She's plenty fond of Runnell, and all torched up because I put him on his heels. Well, what of it? This is no time in my young life to start wool-gathering because I've met up with a pretty girl."

Which was a good enough thought, had it worked. But as he lay in his blankets in his room at Ma Megarry's boarding house, he found sleep eluding him as his thoughts went back again and again to Dale Leslie.

THE SIMCOE engine ran out to the end of steel, pulling a flat loaded with steel and another with ties. The Fresno scraper crews had their mules hooked up and were ready to go. The end of grade was not over 200 yards ahead of the end of steel. Which, as Luke Fenimore said to Joe Keller, wasn't nearly enough.

Luke had met Joe Keller at Garnet at the same time he had met John Guthrie. Joe was boss of the steel crew, burly and powerful, with blunt, honest, likable features. Keller shrugged ruefully. "You got nothing to worry about. I'm the one to do the worrying, Feni-

more. See that flat of steel? Well, that's the last of it."

"Bad as that, eh?" murmured Luke grimly. "And Runnell muffed out on that second-hand steel he was sent after. Joe, there are angles about this layout I can't figure."

Joe Keller flashed a grave look at him, then said, "You ain't the only one that's fighting his head. Well, steel is Guthrie's worry, not mine. He gets it, I'll lay it. But I'm just a gang boss. There's limits to what I can do."

Luke had plenty on his mind the balance of that day. Mainly he concentrated on getting the grade gang moulded into a smooth-working unit. He tramped up and down, Johnny Megarry at his side. He gave orders here, dropped suggestions there, studying his men and their capabilities, placing each in the spot where he could turn in his best work. The men saw that he knew his business, that he knew how to spot the weak links and correct them. He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Several times he lent his weight to the dump handle of an extra heavily loaded scraper. He moved among the pick and shovel men, and he spoke their language, too. The sum total was that dirt moved and moved fast, and the raw scar of new grade began to lengthen and lengthen.

Behind the immediate details of his own job, Luke was thinking about steel. You couldn't build a railroad without steel. It was as he had told Dick Leslie. Steel was the payoff, the one thing you couldn't substitute for. It was, come to think of it, incredible that any road building against a time limit, and with a big subsidy as the goal, would allow itself to be caught short on steel. It all added up to a lot of things without any answers, and Luke made up his mind to get some of those answers at the first opportunity.

The freight road between Castle Mountain and Cold Creek also traveled the valley of the Castle River, and about mid-afternoon a full

dozen big freighters, heavy and groaning under their loads of lead pigs, came rolling slowly along, each drawn by long, sweating strings of mules. Two men rode the box of one of the wagons and this pulled to the side of the road and stopped opposite Luke's gang. One of the men got down and came over.

He was tall and lank, with a heavily boned face and shrewd, squinty eyes. He said to Johnny Megarry, "Plenty of industry today, er? Where's Bole Ives and Cob Ogard?"

"Through," answered Johnny.

The newcomer blinked. "That's news. Who's replacing them?"

"Luke Fenimore here is in charge. I've been made foreman. Luke, shake hands with Jack Fargo."

Fargo shook hands heartily. "Glad to know you, Fenimore. This gang is sure putting out. What did you do, give 'em a shot of hop? If you did," he added with a grin, "how's to borrow some of the stuff? I got a lot of jiggers drawing wages from me who could stand some of the same."

Luke smiled briefly in return. "They're good boys. All they needed was just a chance to go."

Jack Fargo hung around for a few minutes, talking of this and that, his shrewd eyes not missing a trick. Then with a careless wave of his hand he went back to his wagon and the big freighter resumed its creaking way. Luke turned to Johnny Megarry.

"Fargo stands to lose a chunk of freighting business when we put steel into Castle Mountain, Johnny—a mighty big chunk."

JOHNNY nodded. "He does that. Well, it's the story all through the West. When the steel comes in the freighters quit rolling. It was the freighters that put the pack trains out of business. Things change. 'Tis the way of the world, Luke."

They were back at Ma Megarry's supper table before Luke realized that Bart Runnell hadn't shown up on the job all day. Ma Megarry, bringing in a platter of food, stopped beside Luke and murmured, "John Guthrie is back in town. He sent word that he wants to see you at his room in the hotel, Mr. Fenimore."

"Thanks, Ma," nodded Luke.

When, a little later, Luke knocked at Guthrie's door, he found Guthrie alone. Guthrie was a man of medium size, his hair and crisp mustache grizzled with middle age. Now he looked weary and harrassed and he grasped Luke's hand almost eagerly. "Glad you came in, Fenimore. It is a relief to talk to somebody who actually seems to be able to do something for a change, instead of stand around and wait for one man to deliver miracles. Have a chair."

"I've only been around a day and a half,"

said Luke. "But I've seen some angles that make it appear we'll need a miracle or two to get us into Castle Mountain under that subsidy deadline. Mr. Guthrie, how in the name of heaven did this outfit allow itself to be caught short on steel? Steel—of all things!"

Guthrie rolled an unlighted cigar in his lips. Suddenly he waved a hand in hard decision. "I'm through pulling punches to keep somebody else from being bruised and then have all the blame heaped on me. Primarily, we're short of steel because of Henry Shard."

Luke's head jerked up. "Henry Shard! Why, I understand he's one of the three men most interested in getting this road built, one of the three owners of it."

"That's right," said Guthrie drily. "Three men, Shard, Frank Ames and Curtis Leffingwell. They hold the purse strings. Henry Shard is the treasurer. He's what some people might call a good business man. He expects and demands a full dollar of value for every dollar spent. I've heard it said he wants a dollar and five cents of value for every dollar he spends. Be that as it may, the fact remains that Shard tried to shop around among the mills in the East for steel. He tried to bargain."

"There's a place to pinch pennies," said Luke harshly, "and a place not to. You can't build a road without steel."

"Exactly," nodded Guthrie. "To begin

with, as railroads go, we're just a little narrow-gauge, jerkline, wildcat outfit. When we're all done, we'll be just 90 miles long. Given time, the mills will get the steel to us, but it isn't reasonable to expect them, for instance, to drop an order for hundreds of miles of standard-gauge, hundred-pound steel for some big job, just to get out our dinky little order in a hurry.

"Even so, we'd have had our steel if Shard had placed the full order to start with. I tried to get him to do it, but he wouldn't. He said that would tie up too much money at one time, which might be needed for other expenses. So he's been buying 10 or 15 miles of steel at a time. Now, when we need steel the worst way, we haven't got any and the mills can't promise exactly when the next will be along. Maybe in ten days or two weeks, maybe not for a month. Either way, it can ruin us."

"There's no sense in me beating my head off to get grade built if there isn't going to be any steel to lay on it," growled Luke. "What about this second-hand steel Runnell was supposed to round up?"

"That was from that Grasshopper silver strike that looked like a second Comstock Lode and then went flat bust. In the first flush of the boom a narrow-gauge road was started. Some 15 or 20 miles of road had been built when the bubble burst. I was hoping to get that steel. Runnell was sent to put over the deal. We were late. Another outfit had beat us to it. I was," and here weariness settled over Guthrie like a heavy cloak, "depending a great deal on getting hold of that steel."

LUKE stirred restlessly. "I don't know why I should give a thin damn one way or the other. I got nothing at stake here. But I never tied into a job yet that I ran out on. That Grasshopper fiasco isn't the only boom camp in Nevada that's gone bust. There are others, and maybe—" He broke off, staring at the far wall. A gleam came into his eyes. "I know a man with more railroad in his blood than any other I ever met. A man who might know—" He broke off again, jumped to his feet. "Care to give me authority to go see that man, Mr. Guthrie?"

"If," said John Guthrie grimly, "there is a chance to round up some steel, I'll give you authority to go see the King of Siam, Luke. Who is this man?

"Warren Garland."

"Warren Garland! Why, he's division superintendent of the transcontinental at LeMoyne. Too big a man to bother his head—"

"I never found him too big not to have time to lend a friendly ear," declared Luke. "And if there's any narrow-gauge steel laying around loose, he's the one man most likely to know about it. There's an Overland through Garnet at 8:10 in the morning that I can catch if you'll get me to Garnet in time."

"I'll get you there, Luke. I'll see that Alec Craigie and the Simcoe get you there. If it would mean just a few miles of steel! Anything—just so we can make a little progress. How about your gang, Luke? Who'll manage it?"

"Johnny Megarry can handle it. Good boy, Johnny. We'll keep this under our hats, Mr. Guthrie, until we know yes or no on it. Because," and here Luke's eyes narrowed, "I've

bumped into one or two angles that don't add up at all."

Meeting Luke's look, John Guthrie nodded slowly. "And I, Luke. I'm glad to know that someone else has found cause to wonder, that it hasn't all just been a product of my own imagination. In other words, you feel that there's more to some of our troubles than meets the casual eye?"

"I'd bet hard money on it. Too many things have gone haywire all at once to be just a matter of coincidence. Well, I'll be rolling in the morning."

Puffing thoughtfully at his pipe, Luke headed back for the boarding house. On his way he passed the Big Sage saloon. Glancing casually through a window, Luke stopped short, took a longer look. In a little group at the bar stood three men. One of them was Cob Ogard, face still battered and bruised from the weight of Luke's fists. Another was Bole Ives, big and gross. The third was lanky, raw-boned Jack Fargo, the freighter. A whiskey glass was in front of each of them, but they seemed to have more on their minds than just drinking. Their heads were together. Jack Fargo was talking and talking emphatically. The other two were listening.

Luke went on and presently glanced across the night to where the Leslie cabin stood, warm light glowing in its windows. He thought of that light glowing on a girl's dark head, laying tender shadows about her lips and chin and throat. He shook himself, half angrily. "Quit it, you damn fool!" he murmured. "You saw once how Bart Runnell fills her eye."

WARREN GARLAND, a spare, loosely knit man with a bear trap jaw and humorous eyes, swung down from the caboose of a local mainline freight at Corinth, little more than a wire stop and an east-west siding for emergencies. Following Garland was Luke Fenimore.

A hundred yards to the east, on the north side of the main line, were a couple of dilapidated, tumbledown sheds, the largest of which still carried smoke and soot stains. Sagebrush grew right up to the sides of the sheds, and as he led the way over to the ramshackle structures, Warren Garland indicated a ragged, uneven break in the sagebrush, running straight away to the north.

"Here, Luke," he said, "is about all that remains of another mankind's dizzy dreams. Some 30 miles north of here a silver lead was opened up. There was a rush and the usual talk of another big bonanza. They started to build another narrow-gauge railroad and got about a dozen miles along when the silver lead ran out and the rainbow collapsed. Almost an identical case as that Grasshopper fiasco. Too bad you people couldn't have beaten that Western Mining Syndicate and that fellow Fargo to the Grasshopper steel. That—"

"Wait a minute," broke in Luke. "Did you say—Fargo?"

"Why, sure. I'm sure that was the name. I remembered it particularly, because it was a trifle unusual. I got the story about fourth hand, just gossip along the line. As I get it, this Western Mining Syndicate is some newly formed outfit. I suppose we'll hear more of them one of these days, promoting a narrow-gauge out to some prospector's pipe dream of a thriving and permanent camp. Ring in the suckers, rake in the dough. That old, old song."

Luke didn't say a word, but far back in his eyes a cold, grim gleam was dancing. It was as though he had found the answer to something.

Warren Garland tramped open a clump of sage. "Here's your steel, Luke. Plenty of rust, but still steel, inside. And say, you people couldn't use another locomotive, could you? Come on!"

He led the way into the smoke-stained shed. Sure enough, there it stood, festooned with cobwebs, dirt and débris, and smeared with rust. Yet it was a narrow-gauge locomotive. Warren Garland reached up and scrubbed a palm across the manufacturer's name plate.

"Union Foundry," he grunted. "Huh! That is an old-timer. Still," and here he grinned, "it seems to have wheels. Chances are, with a day or two of work by somebody who knows how, plus some oil and grease in the right places, you might get a wheeze or two out of it. In my time I've seen worse. If you're interested in this bucket of rust, Luke, I'll loan you a couple of good men from the roundhouse at LeMoyne, to do what they can to put it in shape. Which reminds me that there's a siding yonder with a couple of old flats on it. The sage has grown up so high they're nearly covered."

The siding and the flats were there, all right. Rickety the flats were, their iron work red with rust. But like the old engine, they

had wheels and they would roll. "You could use 'em to haul the steel out as you tear it up," Garland suggested.

"I can hardly believe it," said Luke. "Like something straight from heaven. Who, I wonder, owns the layout?"

"Lord! I don't know. Whoever does apparently never considered it worth salvaging. You should worry. You need steel—got to have it according to what you say. Here it is. Take it, and worry about the rest later. Your people can always pay for it, same as they would if they got it anywhere else. If you run into any trouble over it, come and see me. I can generally wangle an angle or two that will help."

"You," said Luke, "are the squarest man I know."

"Pshaw!" scoffed Warren Garland. "This is fun. I rather envy you, Luke. Plenty of times I've looked back longingly to the days when it was a triumph every time we got a train through. Now things run along so smoothly I feel like a useless appendage. All I do is sit around and look wise. Besides, I like to see these little feeder lines such as you folks are building, prosper. Those Castle Mountain mines are sound and proven. It's good business for us to see you make the grade."

"If I had wings, I'd break all records from here to Cold Creek," said Luke.

Warren Garland grinned and looked at his watch. "Seeing that you haven't, we'll have to depend on wheels and steam. We'll catch 28 back to LeMoyne in half an hour."

WHEN Luke Fenimore got off a westbound main liner at Garnet it was to see the Simcoe, headlight shining in the early dusk, come rolling up from the south with half a dozen lead-laden flats. Luke went over and climbed into the cab.

"Hello, Fenimore," said Alec Craigie. "Mr. Guthrie said to keep a lookout for you. Said you might have a message to send to him."

"I want to deliver the message myself, boys," said Luke. "It's important enough to be delivered tonight, if posible."

Craigie turned to his fireman. "How about it, Casey?"

"Hell, yes!" growled Casey O'Keefe. "If it's anything that will get things moving with this damned outfit."

"It is," said Luke. "It's steel."

"Ha!" exclaimed Alec Craigie. "That does listen good. Soon as we shunt these flats on to the siding we're heading for Cold Creek.

Free of all load, the Simcoe really rolled. Once, above the rattle and clank, Alec Craigie said, "John Guthrie needs something to cheer him up. Because the Castle Mountain crowd are at Cold Creek and they more or less got the Old Man on the spot."

The miles clicked away. They topped out over Rockaway Pass and fled down toward the valley of the Castle River beyond. And Craigie sent the long bay of his whistle out to greet the lights of Cold Creek. Luke was swinging from the cab even before the engine came to a halt. "Thanks a heap, boys," he called. "I won't forget this favor."

Luke hurried straight to the hotel and to John Guthrie's room. The door was locked. Beyond it sounded voices, angry voices. Luke knocked solidly and it was Guthrie who opened the door. He looked harrassed and weary—and angry. At sight of Luke his face lit up.

"Luke! You wouldn't be back so soon if you didn't have good news. Come in, man, come in!"

Bart Runnell was there, looking sulky, and three other men whom Luke had never seen before. John Guthrie said, "This is Luke Fenimore, gentlemen, the man I was telling you about. Luke, shake hands with Frank Ames, Curt Leffingwell, Henry Shard."

Shard was a thin, round-shouldered man with a narrow face, a tight mouth and a long, pointed nose. Leffingwell was broad and stocky, blunt-featured, with a mask-like inscrutability. Frank Ames was a rosy, roly-poly little man with a wide, humorous mouth. His eyes were brisk and alert, showing keen intelligence.

The room was jam-packed with argument and strain and tobacco smoke. "We've been," said John Guthrie a trifle awkwardly, "discussing our troubles, Luke. Among others—lack of steel."

"I've located some steel, John. Twelve miles of it."

"Ah!" said Curt Leffingwell. "And it can be had?"

"It can be had. Also a locomotive, an old Union Foundry job. Not in the best of shape, but it can be made to earn its keep. A couple of flats—the same."

Frank Ames said. "That's the best news I've heard in a month of Sundays. Go on, Fenimore. Where—and how?"

Luke told them, describing the layout at Corinth. "Warren Garland said he'd put some of his best mechanics to work on the engine and get it in running shape for us. With that to pull those two old flats, we can strip off that old road bed in a hurry. It's there if you want it, gentlemen."

"If we want it!" breathed John Guthrie.

HENRY SHARD cleared his throat. "There is," he said in thin harshness, "a question or two to be answered. Who owns that steel and rolling stock, Fenimore—and what will be the price?"

"I don't know," answered Luke. "Neither does Warren Garland. I suggest we take it and deal with the owners later, when and if we can locate them."

Shard gave a short, barking laugh. "Young man, you have plenty of enthusiasm, but not much business sense. This railroad of ours is a practical business investment, not a gambling institution. We've no desire to be faced wtih a ruinous law suit. We'll be glad to get that Corinth steel, yes—when we've located the owners, negotiated a fair price and closed the deal. Until then we don't touch it."

Luke had been on the go. He had burned up a lot of nervous energy over this thing. He hadn't eaten in better than 12 hours. He had been buoyed high with enthusiasm over the prospects of what he had found and what it meant. Now, with one sneering remark, Henry Shard had put a crusher on the whole thing. Luke got mad. He looked around, saw Bart Runnell with a faint smirk on his face, saw Frank Ames and Curt Leffingwell watching him with unreadable eyes.

"All right," he said, his voice going harsh. "All right! To hell with all of you—but John Guthrie. I thought you had a railroad to build against a deadline to get a State subsidy. I thought this was a job for men with guts and punch. I was wrong. It's a layout for penny-pinching fools. You seem to be playing with the jackass idea that you can build a road without steel, that you can beat that May first deadline by negotiating prices and bargaining for a few nickles. You hire a good man in John Guthrie and then tie his hands, while still expecting him to get results. Hell! It's a joke. I don't know why I should have given a damn, but I did, plenty—up to now. But no more!"

Luke spun around to John Guthrie. "I'm sorry, John, but this is it. You better let Runnell hire back Bole Ives and Cob Ogard. They seem to be the kind of faithful little busy bees these people want. As for me, I'm leaving in the morning."

"I think," said John Guthrie quietly, "that you got something there, Luke. I'll be leaving right with you."

"No!" It was Curt Leffingwell, and there was a growl in his voice. "You'll neither of you leave. Shard hasn't the whole say in this deal, not by a hell of a lot. Frank Ames and I got a voice in things. Fenimore, you go get that steel. Get the engine and the flats. . . . Shut up, Henry! I'm having my say. You've been anything but a success as purchasing agent. You've balled up steel deliveries from the mills, for one thing. From here on in we get action.

"Runnell, you're on damn thin ice. You botched that Grasshopper steel job. Before that you let the grade gang get out of hand and didn't seem a damned bit interested in doing anything about it. Fenimore here has made you look silly from both angles. He's plenty big enough to handle your job, and he'll have it, if you pull any more bloomers. Frank, is there anything you want to add?"

Frank Ames chuckled. "Nothing—except amen. You took the words right out of my mouht."

"Fine! John, we haven't done the best by you up to now. But from here on in you call your shots and we'll ride with you. Only—beat that deadline! Now, I'm going to get some supper."

They filed out, Leffingwell truculent, Ames grinning, Henry Shard sour and tight-lipped. Bart Runnell was glowering. And then Luke and John Guthrie were alone.

GUTHRIE clasped both hands above his head and shook them, in a gesture of victory. "Luke," he exulted, "you're a genius! You sure cleared the air."

"On the contrary, there's plenty of murk," said Luke. "And it's going to get thicker before it clears up. But action is what we need, for time is slipping away from us. I'm taking Joe Keller and his steel gang out to Corinth. I'm taking Dick Leslie along, too. You and Johnny Megarry stay at this end, John, and build grade as fast as possible. We'll catch up with the steel later, if we all have to get out there and start swinging a spiking sledge. You might see Alec Craigie and have him ready to roll by daylight tomorrow. From here on in, take nothing for granted from

anybody. This outfit hasn't seen anything yet in the way of bombshells."

Guthrie frowned, staring at him. "You haven't told all you know, Luke."

"And I won't until I'm a little more sure of things. In the meantime, let's go. You see Joe Keller and Craigie and tell them what to line up. I'll see Johnny Megarry and Dick Leslie."

While eating his supper in Ma Megarry's kitchen, Luke gave Johnny Megarry the picture. Then, his pipe going, Luke headed for the Leslie cabin. At his knock, Dick Leslie opened the door and seized upon Luke excitedly. "All kinds of rumors drifting around, Luke. Come in here and put me right on them. It's even in the air that we may have some steel coming up."

"We have," said Luke. "And you're going out with me to help round it up." And then Luke sketched briefly the story of Corinth steel. While he spoke, Dale Leslie came in from another room of the cabin. Whooping boyishly, Dick caught his sister by the hands and spun her around.

"Hear that, Sis? Luke's rounded up some steel for us. We're going after it in the morning. I'll be needing some gear, of course. My sleeping bag is down at the construction office. I'll go get it. Be back in a jiffy, Luke." And Dick, grabbing coat and hat, dashed out.

Left alone with the girl, Luke smiled gravely. "Fine lad, that brother of yours, Miss Leslie. I like his enthusiasm."

The girl's nod was almost curt. "I hope it doesn't lead him into worshipping false gods."

Luke's face faded. He said bluntly, "Why do you dislike me so? If you're still offended because of the way I watched you that day in the caboose, I'll say again that I'm sorry and that I meant no offense."

She colored faintly. "I wasn't aware that I was interested one way or the other, Mr. Fenimore."

If this wasn't a slap in the face, it was very close. Luke's face hardened. "Which just goes to show how appearances can deceive," he said harshly. "For behind your sheer loveliness there should be some gentleness."

He saw the anger flame into her eyes and knew a wayward satisfaction over it. But before she could answer there was an abrupt knock at the door, then the door opened and Bart Runnell came in. His face was dark with anger.

"So here you are, eh, Fenimore! Now you wouldn't be trying to build your little steel buccaneering scheme up into a triumph, would you?"

"Hardly," answered Luke curtly. "But at least it means we get steel this trip instead of a shrug of the shoulder and a report of failure."

The anger in Runnell's face deepened. "Any time I have to turn damned thief to get steel, I don't want it."

Lines of white bracketed Luke's lips. "This is a good safe place to pull a crack like that, Runnell. Try it again some time when we're not in a lady's house."

DALE LESLIE forestalled further retort by Runnell. "What do you mean, Bart—about this steel question? Is there anything shady concerning it?"

Runnell barked a short laugh. "Shady is putting it mildly, Dale. There's a narrow-gauge property over east at Corinth, on the main line. Fenimore here has sold the idea to Ames and Leffingwell and Guthrie that we go over there and take it, without a by-your-leave from the owners—without even bothering to contact the owners, in fact. Henry Shard was the only one with the decency to oppose such a high-handed business. Sure—just go and take it, along with a locomotive and a couple of flat cars. If that isn't thievery, I don't know what is!"

The girl looked at Luke. "Well?"

"Runnell," said Luke, "forgot to add that the property, to all visible intents and purposes, has been abandoned, and that we intend to pay for what we take, once we locate the owners."

"But you haven't contacted the owners—yet?"

"No, we haven't. No time, as yet. But we've got to have steel to beat the deadline. I'm quite sure the owners, once we locate them, will be tickled pink to get a little money out of something they had virtually given up as a dead loss."

"Never was a thief who couldn't find some excuse for his actions," sneered Runnell.

Little knots of muscle stood out on the hard angles of Luke's jaw. His voice was soft as silk. "That's twice, Runnell. The third time you say it will be the payoff."

Runnell might have said it again, right then and there, had not Dick Leslie come hurrying back to the cabin, lugging a sleep-

ing bag and other gear. His sister turned to him. "I don't think you'd better go to Corinth, Dick. You stick to your own job, here. Let others go and take steel that doesn't belong to them."

Dick stared at her. "Sis, you're talking foolish. Of course I'm going to Corinth. Why shouldn't I?"

"Because Bart says we have no right to that steel. That to take it this way is stealing—no less."

"Bosh!" exclaimed Dick heatedly. "If Bart was to show a little more enthusiasm for getting things done and less for making excuses and criticising others, I'd like it better. Luke, I'll be ready to leave in the morning with you and Joe and the rest of the boys."

Luke smiled grimly. "Good boy, Dick. Be seeing you, fella." He bowed slightly to the girl. "Good night, Miss Leslie. Don't worry. I won't lead your brother astray."

JOE KELLER and his gang ripped up steel far faster than they had ever laid it down. The mechanics whom Warren Garland sent out to Corinth from the roundhouse at LeMoyne checked over the old Union Foundry engine and went to work. In a little less than a day they had it ready to go.

"She'll squeak and she'll rattle and do a heap of leaking at the seams," a grinning mechanic told Luke Fenimore. "And she won't push a mountain down by a hell of a lot. But she ought to earn her keep. Good luck!"

Along the back trail of jobs Luke had worked at in his time, had been a summer at the throttle of a switch engine in a freight yard. So the workings of the Union Foundry job were not a complete mystery to him. With Dick Leslie firing for him, he made the old-timer go. With the two flats in front of them they pushed slowly out to the end of the steel. There were places where they had to stop and grub out sagebrush that had overgrown the tracks. They filled washouts and bolstered up rotten ties. They held their collective breaths and waited for calamity to strike. They lurched and wobbled and clanked. They squeaked and rattled and squealed. But they got to the end of steel where, as fast as it was ripped up, it was piled on the flats and hauled back to Corinth. Each trip progressively shortened the run.

As fast as a full car of steel was piled at Corinth, it was loaded on a main line flat and sent along to Garnet, there to be transferred to a Desert and Central narrow-gauge flat and hauled south to Cold Creek behind the Simcoe.

Rolling back to Corinth with still another load, Luke called across the cab above the wheezing labors of the old engine, "One more day and we'll have it all, Dick."

They snorted out of the last fringe of sage and rolled to a stop at the main line siding. Over by the sheds four saddled horses stood, shot-hipped and dozing. Two strangers, who had been talking to the cooks, came sauntering over, eyeing Luke and Dick speculatively as they climbed down out of the cab.

"Howdy!" said the leader of the two strangers. "Jing and me are deputies, working out of the sheriff's office at Viault. We're looking for a couple of gents, one named Fenimore, and other Leslie. Where'll we find 'em?"

"What do you want them for?" asked Luke guardedly.

"Well, there's a little matter of a court injunction to put a stop to this funny business of snatching this steel. Then there's a couple of warrants for arrest."

"Arrest for what?"

"What do you think? For stealing railroad equipment, of course. Now you two wouldn't happen to be Fenimore and Leslie, would you?"

"There's no sense to one of those warrants," rapped Luke. "The one for Dick Leslie. He's just working for me."

The deputy grinned thinly. "You're Fenimore, I take it?"

"That's right."

"And I'm Leslie," said Dick firmly. "If you can arrest Luke, you can arrest me. I'm in this all the way, for better or worse."

"Looks like it's for worse, partner," drawled the deputy. "All right, Jing, slap the cuffs on them!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

The Mysterious Cupid

By William Freeman Hough

GLOOM was thicker than the smell of old leather there in the saddle shop as Sheriff Dave Pollard found a seat on a bench and rolled a cigarette. Before him, chin cupped in horny palm, was Hank Sims, sad-eyed and sunk in morass of misery. Chip Sims, his fourteen-year-old son, straddled a half-finished saddle expectantly, eyes switching from one man to the other.

"I reckon you made a mistake, Dave, appointin' me a deputy for this district. Mighty kind of you to do it, help out an old friend thataway; but you made a mistake just the same."

"Nonsense!" declared Dave Pollard.

"I guess Pa just ain't up on this modern deduction stuff," said Chip Sims, digging imaginary spurs into the wooden horse supporting the saddle. "He knows straight cattle rustlin', but this—" He stopped as his father stared at him reproachfully.

"Tell me about it," suggested Dave sympathetically.

"Well, Dave, there ain't just no reason or sense to it. Here I am, a deputy in the most sedate district of the county, and immediate crazy things start to happen. Personal, I don't count, but it looks like somebody was tryin' to discredit your administration right at the start. That hurts like blazes. I done my best but I can't savvy it. Hated like sin to send for you."

"Tell me about it," Dave repeated.

"It started over a week ago. Belle Floury comes in here and tells me that she finds Boswell's prize stallion tied in her barn one mornin'. Nobody knows how the stud got there, don't savvy it at all. Two days later she finds a bunch of Lazy T calves in her corral. Been put in there durin' the night. Nobody knows how they got there. She sets a man to watch the next night, and I'm there too, but

nothin' happens. The blasted kleptocrook don't show up there but moves a yearlin' colt from Joplin's JJ spread over to Teuman's Lazy T. The next night I watch at Joplin's place and Belle finds Teuman's buckboard in her yard. I shift back to the Star F and Joplin finds a Gardner brandin' iron draped on his corral fence."

"It's been going on all week, Hank?"

"All week, Dave. I've been up and ridin' every night, doin' my best, but can't ketch a sight or sound of the blasted buzzard. It's worse than snakin' smugglers back in the old Ranger days. Folks is talkin' about it, laughin' at you and me."

"Sure," said Chip Sims. "They come in here in the mornin' and ask me what Pa has found. Pa is sleepin' by that time and I won't wake him up."

THERE was a different sort of reason for the funny business going on on Belle Floury's range.

"Chip stays here in the shop for me," said Hank Sims. "He gets hostile when they laugh at the new sheriff and new deputy. "

Chip bobbed his head. "I get sorta mad, Dave, but a fella can't blame folks much, seein' as what is happenin'."

Dave Pollard thoughtfully crushed out his cigarette under a boot heel. His race for the office of sheriff had been close, but he was almost sure that he had no enemies in this district where he was best known. As Belle Floury's ranch manager he had made friends over a period of years.

"Well, let's get at this thing," he said presently. "Let's consider it, Hank."

"Make some modern deductions?" asked Chip eagerly.

"You've been reading something, Chip," said Dave with a grin. "Yes, call it modern deduction if you like. First of all, everything that has been taken was merely shifted from one place to another."

"That's right; not actual stealin' at all. But Boswell, Teuman, Joplin and Miss Belle are gettin' mighty restive about it."

"And you find no trace of the culprit at any time. They don't show up at the place you're watching. That means they know where you are all the time."

"Seems as though," gloomed Hank Sims. "I don't believe in ghosts, but—"

"Another angle," Dave interrupted, "is the fact that nothing has been taken from Belle's place."

"By golly, that's right! The stud, the calves and the buckboard are left at the Star F, but nothin' lifted from there."

"But when you set up a watch at Belle's place the trouble shifted to another ranch. Probably to draw you off."

"Betcha that's it!" cried Chip. "That's sure deductin' some, Dave."

"Oh, that's just plain sense, Chip. What we got to do is find a reason for all this. If someone hasn't gone just plain loco, there's a motive for it."

"Yeah, motive!" approved Chip, gripping the saddle horn.

"Tell me, are there any strangers here?"

Hank Sims shook his head, but Chip said, "There's that new foreman Miss Belle hired to take your place, Dave. Name is Newt Giddings."

"Yeah?" with lifted eyebrows. "Well, it isn't likely that Belle would hire an off-balanced foreman. What object would he have in pulling such stuff?"

Silence followed the question; then out of the depths of deep thought Chip said, "Well, he sure gets a heap of store by Miss Belle. Maybe he's doin' it so's he can come up a hero for her."

"How do you figure that out, Chip?" Dave was grinning again.

"Well, he could tell her some day that he was gettin' tired of this sort of business and was goin' out to stop it. If he was doin' it himself, that would be easy to stop. So he's a hero!"

Dave Pollard laughed aloud. "You've got a great imagination, youngster."

As he finished speaking the little bell over the shop door tinkled. Belle Floury came into the shop with long, easy strides. She said, "Mr. Sims, I just wanted to report that—Oh, Dave! I mean, Mr. Sheriff. Didn't see you at first. How do you do!" She was deliberately making her voice impersonal but not disguising the thin sarcasm.

" 'Morning, Belle," he said pleasantly. "You were going to report just what?"

"Well, since you're the sheriff, I suppose I can tell you that this morning we found two sets of JJ branding irons on our porch. Not that it matters a great deal, but this odd business is becoming terribly monotonous."

"I reckon," he said simply. "Got any ideas, Belle?"

"Certainly not! It's not my job to have ideas. Rather, I'm under the impression that it is a matter for the law."

Chip said, "Gee, you're purty this mornin', Miss Belle."

"She always is," added Dave.

"Thank you, Chip," said the girl coolly.

"Specially when she's kind of provoked," Dave went on. "Like this morning, and some other times I can recall."

"I'm not here to discuss my personal appearance," she remarked testily. "A matter of duty only."

Dave Pollard rose and stretched his long legs. "I'll walk down the street with you, if you don't mind."

"Really, sheriff, it's broad daylight and this is a very peaceful community."

HE TOOK her elbow in the palm of his hand and guided her toward the door. Over his shoulder he said, "See you later, Hank." Out on the walk and stepping along toward her waiting horse he said, "This monkey business has got Sims worried to death."

"But not you?" she questioned.

"More curious than worried, Belle. You must have some sort of an idea about it."

"None at all!" crisply.

"Even though it's just meant to mock me as sheriff?"

"Should I be concerned about that?"

"You were plenty concerned when I said I wanted to make the race for the office."

"Naturally; I didn't want to lose a good ranch manager. A matter of business."

"Yeah," he murmured. "Business. Maybe that's what I was thinking about too. After all, what future is there in just being a ranch manager?"

"We discussed all this once, Dave, and I see no point in going over it again."

"That's the trouble with you, Belle; always so business-like. You always wore the pants out there at the Star F, literally and figuratively. As manager I was just a dumb wall up against which you could bounce your ideas."

"I've said that you were a good manager; I offered to raise your wages. But you had this sheriff business fixed in your mind and wouldn't listen."

Dave thought, "I would have listened if you'd talked like a woman." Aloud he said, "Is this man Giddings all right?"

She turned on him. "Dave, I don't want to quarrel with you. What I do out there, who I hire is strictly my own affair. Please stop baiting me."

"Now you're becoming prettier than ever, Belle."

"Please," she begged.

"You see," he went on, "I'm interested in how you make out even though you don't care about my success as a sheriff. People are laughing about this thing now, but sooner or later they're going to wonder why all the stolen stuff is found at the Star F."

"Yes," she admitted, "and I'll appreciate it if you'll do something to stop it."

"I'll stop it," he assured her, "but in the meantime you might be thinking of a reason for it. Somebody wants to hurt you or me, and it's up to us to find out who that person is."

"It's not up to me, Dave. I've no reputation to lose as a sheriff."

"Neither have I. I've got to win my reputation first."

She swung into the saddle and looked down at him. "We're not getting anywhere with all this," she informed him.

"I guess not," he agreed. "I'm only hoping that no one on your place is mixed up in this matter; for I'm getting a little provoked now, and I don't think I'll fool with the party once I lay hands on 'em."

"Do you mean that for a threat?"

"Should I? Are you really afraid I may tag it on the Star F?"

Her laugh was more of a foil than an expression of amusement; he saw true concern in the depths of her eyes. Then her lips straightened and she lifted rein. "Drop in for a meal if you happen to be out our way," she said with a light wave of her hand.

"That's right charitable of you," he called after her.

Back at the saddle shop Dave found that Hank Sims had turned in to catch up on his sleep. Chip was sprawled on a pile of leather findings in a corner, but sat up as Dave entered and fixed the sheriff with bright, eager eyes. "What'd she say?" he asked. "What does she think?"

"Chip," said Dave, "I've never yet been able to figure out just what Belle thinks."

"But didn't she want you to come out there and watch the place?"

"Her invitations were not elaborate, Chip."

Chip pondered this; then, "But she ought to know it looks bad for the Star F." He slumped back on the pile of leather. "I'll bet that Giddings gent knows somethin'. Betcha he does."

DAVE rolled another smoke and sat back to think. The actual transfer of stock and equipment from one ranch to another was a cock-eyed business in itself, with no great discomfort to those involved. But—there was a reason for it could discredit himself and his administration. For if a sheriff could not solve these simple affairs what would he do with a serious situation? And that brought him back to Belle Floury.

He couldn't imagine Belle having a revengeful nature, but he was strongly aware of her almost fierce pride. She had lost an argument with her ranch manager, and that had hurt her deeply. And at this very moment Dave knew that if she had said that she needed him, not only as a manager but as a man, he never would have run for sheriff. On the other hand, if she had wanted to give less value to his service, she would have elevated one of her riders to the job instead of importing this fellow Giddings.

"Unless," he mused aloud, "Giddings would do these crazy things for her when one of the boys who know me would balk at the job."

There was no great profit in speculation; it only increased his discontent. But he knew he must do something, for no matter what the offense might be he, as sheriff, would be expected to clear it up.

He was still without a definite plan of action when he went down to Sims' place late that afternoon. Instead of entering the shop he went around to the rear where Chip was just leading up their old cow which was kept in the town pasture. Chip was riding his bay gelding, for he disdained to walk even the short distance to the pasture. The boy looked down at him from the very ornate saddle his father had made for him.

"Find out anythin', Dave?" he asked.

Dave Pollard pursed his lips and was silent for a rather long time. Chip began to fidget in the saddle.

"You mean about this night monkey business?" asked Dave at last.

"Why, sure."

"Well, no I haven't, Chip. I've thought of it some this afternoon, but it doesn't seem to be so important as at first. Just a crazy stunt after all. Probably won't happen any more. You tell your pa to stay home tonight, not bother about going out."

"You're going out yourself?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Not worth while."

"But what will Miss Belle think then?"

"Does that matter so much, Chip?"

"We-ll," slowly, "she ought to be protected."

"So long as nothing of hers is taken she needn't worry. No one is going to accuse her of rustling calves or branding irons. I'll stay around till morning then ride back to the county seat. You tell Hank to forget it."

He patted the boy's leg and turned away. Chip Sims called after him, "There's a dance up town tonight, in the Odd Fellows Hall. Newt Giddings will be there, with Miss Belle. They always come into the dances. It might be a good chance to look him over, Dave."

Dave waved a hand. "It might, at that."

He was standing across the street that evening when Belle Floury and her new foreman arrived at the Odd Fellows Hall. It was dusk and he couldn't see them distinctly, but Belle's light laughter as Giddings handed her up the stairs to the hall struck a chord deep within Dave's heart. He waited for a time, then went up the stairs himself.

THE DANCERS were in the midst of the first waltz, with Belle slowly circling within the arms of a tall man whose main distinction appeared to be a natty mustache. That mustache alone was enough to damn the man in Dave's opinion; a fellow who'd wear one of those things wouldn't hesitate to do anything small. Dave stepped onto the floor, timed his approach and met them. "Mind if I break in?" he said and took Belle from Giddings.

"Well!" she said as she let him swing her on into the waltz. "I suppose that a badge gives you this privilege?"

"Not necessarily," he replied. "Let's say it's just for old time's sake."

"I wasn't aware that that constituted a privilege," tartly.

"Let's don't quarrel now," he suggested. "After all, we won a prize waltz once."

They circled the hall while Giddings watched from the doorway.

"I should think you'd be out hunting the thief," she said.

Dave chuckled. "What's the use of riding when the culprit is right here in town?"

"What?" she gasped and leaned back in his arms to stare up into his face.

"Our bold, bad bandit is here in town," he repeated.

"Then why don't you arrest him?"

"Oh, I'd rather catch the brigand red-handed."

"Then you're just guessing," she declared.

"Well, Belle, the law is sort of particular. You may suspect a person, be convinced in your own mind, but you've got to have actual proof when you go into court."

"I see," she murmured.

"I may not even bother with it at all, Belle. There's no actual crime being committed."

"Then you don't care if people laugh at you?"

"Do you care if people laugh at me?" he countered.

Before she could answer, Newt Giddings broke in on them. Without a word of request and with his lips thinned resolutely, he wedged in and took Belle from Dave. Dave, his mission accomplished, laughed and pushed his way through the crowd to the door.

At eleven o'clock, when the dancers came downstairs for refreshments, Belle Floury wasn't laughing. Dave caught a glimpse of her as she and Giddings entered the restaurant with the others, and there were tiny wrinkles of worry between her eyes. He attached some significance to the fact that she did not return to the hall above but sought her horse at the hitch-rail, and by the time the music started again she and Giddings were riding out of town. It was then that Dave got his own horse and rode swiftly off, out across the prairie.

The full moon was in the middle of the calm sky when he arrived at the entrance of Crazy Cow Canyon just north of the Star F. The bright light of that moon forced him to take shelter in the heavy brush that lined the canyon trail. He had laid the foundation for this night's adventure, considered every possible angle, and had chosen this spot as the most likely place of development. If he had guessed wrong, it meant hard riding and possibly failure. No one could see him waiting here and, by the same token, he could not see the trail or any approach to it. He must judge by sound only.

FURTHER up the canyon was a spring surrounded by mossy stones, a cool and refreshing spot on a hot day. Now, as he sat his horse waiting, he thought of the many times he and Belle had paused there to discuss ranch problems and ranch policy. Rather, she had discussed these things, watching his face for reactions. She seemed to sense when he disproved of anything, and always changed her mind before he could speak of it. This procedure had built a barrier between them.

"Pride," he had told himself over and over again. "Unreasoning, fierce pride. She'd rather die than have anyone think she couldn't run the Star F all by herself. And all the time she needed me."

And so at those times when they had stopped there at the spring, in the cool and calmness of the place, when he would have chosen to speak of something near his heart, she had fenced with him. Until for his own pride's sake he made his decision to quit and run for sheriff. And this time her pride had been hurt.

There were frogs at the spring tonight, and their croaking came down to him there in the brush. He knew that at the slightest sound that croaking would abruptly cease, giving him warning. Gazing at the shadowed reaches of the rising canyon he saw nothing but moon splashes. And as he sat there minute after minute, he began to wonder if he had been too sure of himself. Things could have happened to prevent what he had suspected would take place.

And then, after nearly an hour had dragged by, the frog croaking stopped. He stood up in the stirrups but could see nothing below at the trail. Then presently he heard the slight squeak of saddle leather and the soft plop of hoofs. A rider was entering Crazy Cow Canyon. With quickening heart he let his horse move slowly forward, making the least noise possible. The rider below was moving slowly also, almost reluctantly, he thought. He tried to keep the sound just so loud in his ears. And then he came to the edge of the brush.

He had reined his horse up-canyon, riding into the edge of the trail when a horse came from the opposite side at full tilt. They collided there, shoulder to shoulder, and Dave threw up an arm to catch a hurtling figure.

The full weight of the rider bore him back and off the far side of his horse, to land there near the brush in a tangle of legs and arms.

"You ride late, Belle," he said, drawing her to her feet beside him.

"You, Dave! I thought—"

"Thought it was Giddings?"

"No! Giddings is back at the ranch, in his bunk."

"Sure he is. Giddings knows nothing about this."

"But somebody has stolen my roan riding mare out of the barn."

"When did you discover that, Belle?"

"When I got home from the dance."

"You didn't mention it to Giddings?"

"No. I wanted to—to catch the party myself."

"Just to show up the new sheriff, eh?"

She stopped to brush the dust from her skirt. His spur had run a jagged line across the heel of one boot and she smoothed the spot with her fingers.

"Well, all right; so I wanted to show up the new sheriff!" She straightened up and looked into his face. There were streaks of dirt across her cheek and he removed them gently with his handkerchief. She stood quite still while he did this; her lips quivered slightly.

"No, Belle, I don't think you mean that."

"At least," she murmured, "I wanted to get my roan mare back."

"Not that so much, either," he said. "Quite likely the mare would be taken to some other ranch and left there." He took her arms and turned her to face him more directly. "Tell me the real reason," he urged.

BELLE FLOURY drew in a quick breath. "Well, supposing I did want to stop it so's people wouldn't laugh at you again? I'm—I'm getting tired of hearing them talk about it."

"So you thought that you'd catch the rascal and then tell me so that I could make an arrest. You wanted to do it for me, Belle?"

"Yes," defiantly, "I did."

"But I told you in town tonight that I knew who was doing it. Did you think I suspected you, or Giddings?"

"I didn't know, Dave. I knew it wasn't Giddings. Most of all, I didn't want you to think I was doing such a crazy thing. And, too, you didn't act as though you were going to do anything about it tonight."

"Maybe I just acted that way for a purpose. Maybe I wanted to see if you would try to help me."

"Why, you—you—"

"Easy," he cautioned. "Don't say something else you don't mean. You've committed yourself now, Belle. I know you think enough of me to worry about this situation and try to help me. But why, oh why didn't you act this way long ago?"

"I—I don't know, Dave. I wanted to say things, but—"

"I wanted to say things too, but you never gave me the chance. You wouldn't even hint that you actually needed me. Instead, you quarreled with me."

"Just couldn't help it, Dave," she murmured.

He put a hand under her chin and tilted it upward. Slowly, deliberately he kissed her, and Belle Floury sighed thankfully and swayed against him. She remained thus for blissful minutes, then suddenly swung back.

"My mare!" she cried. "He's getting away with her."

"Plenty of time," he soothed and led her to her horse.

"Who is it, Dave? Who's doing this crazy business, and what for?"

"I know who but not exactly why," he told her. "Let's ride and find out."

They did not take the canyon trail but circled to the west and climbed the steep side of the canyon to gain an ascending ridge. They followed this for a mile or more and then cut down the side of it, into the brush and, at last, came out into the canyon trail well above the spring.

"We'll wait here," said Dave and indicated that they should use the brush shelter. "He's below us, coming slowly."

Ten minutes later the erstwhile horse thief rounded a bend in the canyon trail and came plodding on toward them. He was leading Belle's mare, the end of the halter rope clenched tightly in his hand. He must have been half asleep, for he didn't see the pair ahead even when they stepped into the trail and waited his coming. He didn't look up until Dave cried, "Halt, you! Throw up your hands!"

CHIP SIMS' mouth sagged wide open for an instant. He blinked swiftly, eyes first on one of them and then the other. When he fully recognized them his lips formed into a half-fearful smile.

"Hello," he said.

"You're under arrest, Sims," said Dave sternly. "Don't try any funny business."

"Yeah. I mean no, Sheriff."

"Fell into my trap, didn't you?" Dave went on. "When I told you I wasn't riding tonight you thought you'd do some more stealing."

"I—uh—yeah, that's it. I was afraid you'd leave without comin' out here."

"Why did you want me to come out here?"

"Well, I meant come out to the Star F." Dave was keeping his voice very stern, very hard, and Chip Sims gulped a couple of times.

"Why should I come out to the Star F?"

"To—to sorta protect Miss Belle. She needs you there."

"Look here, Chip! Have you been doing all this to fetch me in from the county seat?"

Chip nodded. "I wanted you to see Miss Belle again. I know she wanted to see you."

"Why, Chip Sims!" exclaimed the girl. "What gave you that idea?"

"One day when you was in town you dropped a letter on the street. It was addressed to Dave Pollard. I picked it up and gave it back to you and you got sort of red in the face and tore up the letter without mailin' it. So I knew you wanted to see him, but—but—"

"Bless your heart," murmured Belle Floury and reached out to place an arm about the boy's slim shoulders.

Chip was very close to tears now. "Maybe it was kinda crazy, but I didn't know how else to fetch Dave back here. I hated to worry Pa with this, but I knew he'd never ketch me and would sooner or later send for Dave. I reckon he'll whale the daylights outa me for it."

Dave began to laugh softly. "No he won't, Chip. He'll never know anything about all this. The rustling will just suddenly stop, and that's all there'll be to it."

"But you got to arrest me," cried Chip.

"Nonsense! You haven't committed any crime."

"Honest? Gee, then everythin's all right! It worked out like I wanted it to work out."

"You must have been reading some exciting stories lately, son. Now you head for home, get into bed and keep still about this affair."

"Sure, Dave." He handed over the halter rope. "I was just goin' to leave the mare at the JJ."

"We'll take the horse home again. You hit the grit now."

Chip swung his bay gelding about. "Dave," he asked, "did you know who it was all the time?"

Dave Pollard grinned. "Sure, Chip. You see, in the first place, the bandit, the low-down thievin' skunk, knew just where Hank Sims was going to be each night. Nobody but you knew that. Then I noticed that there was a smudged place on the skirt of your saddle, like you'd been carrying branding irons tied there. On top of all that, you could hardly keep awake yesterday afternoon. You'd been out nights too much. Does that stack up?"

"Gee, Dave, it sure does. You're a swell sheriff after all."

"Oh, that's very simple deducting, Chip. There's other things a lot harder. Now you skip along home."

As Chip Sims loped back down the trail Belle said, "That's really very smart figuring on your part, Dave."

"Purely elemental, Belle dear, compared to my efforts to figure you out. At that, it took Chip's work to help me do it."

"Chip never forgets a favor," she murmured. "I gave him that bay gelding a couple of years ago. Remember?"

Dave nodded and was silent for a time. At last he said, "I'm just wondering how you'll like it, Belle."

"Like it, Dave? To have you back on the Star F?"

"No. I'm wondering how you'll like to be married to a sheriff."

"Oh! Oh, that!" She rode in nearer to him. "You're a mighty shrewd sheriff, Dave, but I'll bet you'd never know by looking into my eyes that I've been thinking about that very thing ever since you were elected."

Down at the canyon spring the frogs were silent a long time while Dave and Belle discussed the future and made up for some of the time lost there in the past.

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Moonlight on the Sage

By C. S. Montanye

IT MUST have been something in Duke Traggart's voice that made Laurie react to him even before she laid eyes on him.

THE program on the radio in the big, raftered living room of the Bar B O ranch house ended with the brazen blare of trumpets. The voice of the announcer followed almost immediately:

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, Duke Traggart, on Satin, his pinto pony, rides off into the Western sunset. . . . This ends our present series of the Cowboy King's adventures. But the Duke will be with you again next year. When September rolls around listen for the crack of his sixguns and the thud of his pony's hoofs. . . . Now, ladies and gentlemen, a personal word to each and everyone of you from the Duke himself!"

Laurie Gale, in the depths of the huge chair between the screened windows, made a face. A new voice, breezy and dripping with friendliness, boomed across the air waves and into the ranch house room:

"Howdy, folks! This here is Duke. I just want to say thanks to all you good people for listenin' to my little show all these weeks. I'll be back again, so don't go and forget me in the meantime. Keep alistenin' for my yippee, and little Satin's gallopin' hoofs. Him and me send you our very best, folks. So long now!"

"Sickening," Laurie murmured.

But that wasn't all. The announcer cut in again for a final word:

"I want to remind all of the Duke's admirers that they can still obtain an autographed photograph of the Cowboy King. Simply clip the words *Golden Oats*, the Satin Smooth breakfast food, from a box of Golden

Oats Quick-Cooking Cereal—the food of Rangers—and send it with one dime to the station to which you are listening—"

"I guess that's enough." With a faint smile Chan Gale, Laurie's father, snapped the voice off. "Unless, of course," he added slyly, "you want a picture of Traggart."

"To hang in the barn and scare the rats away." Laurie wrinkled her nose. "Radio cowboy!" Contempt made her soft voice husky. "I'll bet that faker never saw the top side of a hoss, or shot a real gun in his life! Oh, well, if the public likes him, let them have him."

There were two others in the room besides Laurie and her father. Sidney, her younger sister, was busy in a corner with a jigsaw puzzle spilled out on a card table. Young Clem Cook, from the adjoining Triangle V, lounged a little way off from the table, his gaze focused on Sidney's youthful profile.

"Funny thing," Clem said. "Traggart's due down here in Ellentown sometime next week."

"No!" Laurie straightened up in the chair. "You're fooling, Clem!"

"He never fools, the fool," Sidney murmured amiably, not raising her glance from the puzzle's pieces.

"Sure, he's coming." Clem seemed to enjoy Laurie's astonishment. "I got it direct from Brad Cutler. Brad says he's had a lot of letters from Traggart. The Duke's made a heap of money and is aimin' to buy a spread down here."

Laurie's smoky blue eyes widened. For a minute she stared incredulously. Then she bent forward, the lamplight gilding her tawny blond hair, and parted her curved, crimson lips.

"That phony buying a ranch in Ellentown!" She turned to her father. "Dad, if that happens, you can sell out and move on. I wouldn't live in the same state with that hombre!"

Chan Gale, rugged and burned brown from the range sun, shoved his boots further out in front of him. He ran a slow hand over his grizzled grey hair and looked at his elder daughter. In the mellow glow of the lamp Laurie was lovely. Like her mother, Chan thought, with the same creamy skin, the same eyes and the same perfect features.

She was slim and straight as a boy. Yet ripening maturity gave her a femininity both radiant and glamorous. In short riding skirt and open-throated blouse, she made a charming picture framed by the dark upholstery of the tall chair.

"Don't be silly, Laurie. What have you got against this Duke person?" her father asked. "He's making a living, the same as all of us."

"Darned good livin'," Clem put in, authoritatively. "Brad says he gets a thousand dollars a week."

"What I wouldn't do with *that*!" Sidney said, glancing up for the first time.

"Yeah, what?" Clem asked.

"I'd go down to Waverly and I'd get me some Carson boots with diamond-studded heels. I'd get a solid gold Indian belt and a doeskin riding outfit. I'd get—"

She went on, dreamily enumerating her imaginary purchases, while Laurie drew a breath and turned to her father:

"Don't get me wrong. I haven't anything against Traggart. I just dislike him on general principles. It seems a shame that anybody can work up a reputation like his by reading lines from a piece of paper and yelling 'yippie'. We've got half a dozen boys out in the bunkhouse right now who are the real thing. And what do they get—wages and grub. You don't see them sending autographed photographs to their admirers at a dime a copy."

"Because," Sidney cut in, "they haven't any admirers. Nobody but—Dad—and us—know they exist."

Chan Gale yawned, got up and stretched. "I know I can't exist unless I get to bed. Branding tomorrow. Lot of veal to put a mark on. 'Night."

"Reckon I'd better be goin', too," Clem said, with a glance at the clock. To Sidney, he added, "Think you'll have that puzzle done before fall? I'd like to take you in to town some night, to the movies."

Sidney went out on the porch to say good night to him and Laurie breathed in the perfume of the honeysuckle. Then she switched off the light and went slowly up the stairs to her own room, half hearing Sidney's low laugh in the dark outside, and mysterious sounds that told her Clem had kissed her sister.

Laurie dropped down on the window seat. Moonlight on the sage lay like thick, molten silver. She stared out at it, thinking about love, about romance and—Mex Dawson. Was she really in love with Mex or was it imagination playing tricks with her? She had known him three months now and wasn't sure, couldn't decide. But she did know that Mex

fascinated her, that when she was with him her heart pounded crazily and her warm, red lips grew tremulous.

Her father frowned on this sentimental interlude. Gale, lenient and broad-minded, for some reason didn't like Mex Dawson. More than once he drawled:

"Look, honey. I don't go around tossing monkey wrenches in the machinery of love affairs, but if I were you I'd be just a mite careful of Mex. After all, nobody seems to know much about him. Three months in town, even if he owns the biggest grain store in these parts, doesn't make him a solid citizen. I've always had an idea he's a pretty smooth customer. So you just use that smart little head of yours and don't let him put nothin' over on you."

LAURIE was thinking of what her father had told her one afternoon a week later when she loped her favorite bay colt across the range and into town.

She had a few errands to do, mail to pick up at the post office, some bills to pay. When she reached Ellentown she left the colt at the hitching-rack in front of Brad Cutler's combined real estate office and barber shop. Lounging on the post office porch, Laurie caught a glimpse of the usual range hands, spending their day off retailing the town gossip. A dozen pairs of eyes focused on her as she went up the steps. Ten-gallon hats swept off respectfully. Everyone in that part of the state knew Laurie Gale.

"Howdy, boys." She made her greeting gay and friendly. "Nice day."

"If we don't get a dust storm," a wrangler from the Long Bar Ranch, up the creek, grinned.

"Stranger in town's raisin' plenty of it," somebody else said.

Laurie didn't pay much attention. She collected the mail for the Bar B O, and had about finished her errands when Brad Cutler caught a glimpse of her through the window of his shop and came out. Somebody followed him, but Laurie hardly noticed. Brad, small and animated, always amused her. The man's toupee was never in place and he sported the most extreme in cowboy duds.

"Just a minute, Miss Laurie. Got somebody body here who hankers to meet you."

For the first time Laurie noticed the man who had followed Cutler out to the street. He stood behind Brad, tall, slim and attractive. Laurie's smoky blue eyes widened when she saw his outfit. He wore fawn buckskin shirt and riding trousers, lacquered boots and cream-colored sombrero. His neckerchief was a bright crimson, knotted loosely, his woven metal belt a thing of intricate beauty. Laurie had a suspicion of what Brad Cutler was going to say before he said it.

"Miss Laurie, I want to introduce you to Duke Traggart. Mebbe you've heard his show on the radio. Duke, this heah is one of Chan Gale's gals. Name of Laurie."

Laurie stood perfectly still, tensely still. Traggart moved around the little man, his hat sweeping off quickly. His hand closer over hers before she could prevent it. Speechlessly, she looked up into grey eyes smiling at her, conscious of his wavy brown hair, the way it grew back from his forehead, the width of his shoulders and the narrowness of his waist.

"This is a great pleasure," she heard Traggart say. "Oddly enough, I'm stopping off at the Bar B O tomorrow. I have a letter of introduction to your father from Hal Bechdolt, Star Beef, Chicago, one of his old friends. You might tell him."

"I—I will," Laurie managed to murmur.

IN SOME way she got the bay colt unhitched and found herself in the saddle. Startled and confused, she was annoyed at the warm tide of color in her face. So that was Duke Traggart! The Cowboy King of the radio range! And all dolled up in circus clothes! Still, Laurie decided, he didn't look the type to make a fool of himself. Somehow he resembled a real he-man, anything but what she had mentally pictured him when she had listened to his blood-and-thunder exploits on the air.

Near the Silver Dollar Café someone rode up beside her and she heard her name called:

"Laurie, what's your hurry?"

Mex Dawson pulled his pony even with hers. Under the brim of his ten-gallon hat his black eyes gave her an intimate, caressing greeting. He wasn't quite as tall as Traggart, but heavier, more brawny. He was very dark —which probably was why he was called Mex —and handsome in a bold, hawk-like way. White, even teeth flashed in his dark-skinned face when he reached out and caught the bridle of her mount.

"Hello, Mex. Did you see him?" Laurie's heart began to beat faster.

"See who?"

"Duke Traggart. The Cowboy King. The one who shoots hundreds of villains every week on the radio. He's in town. Brad Cutler just introduced me to him and is he purty!"

Mex Dawson grinned. "Reckon I did catch a sight of a tall stranger in fancy togs. But don't let's talk about him. Seems like I haven't seen you in more'n a month of Sundays, Laurie. How about me ridin' out some night soon and takin' you for a stroll in the moonlight? Got a heap of it these evenin's."

She looked up at him, knowing exactly what he meant—his arm around her, his face close to hers and his kiss burning on her curved mouth. Laurie felt her breath catch in her throat, her heart skip a beat. But she didn't stop smiling and when she answered her voice was casual, her words almost careless.

"Do that, Mex. Any time."

He rode as far as the range trail with her, said good-by and left Laurie to gallop back to the ranch, her eyes cloudy and her lips parted.

"So you met him and he looks like the pictures of Buffalo Bill!" Sidney exclaimed, when Laurie told about her meeting with Traggart. "And he's coming here—tomorrow? I'll have to shake a dime out of my piggy bank. Or maybe he doesn't carry the autographed photos around with him."

"Wait a minute!" Chan, listening in, took over the conversation. "Bechdolt's one of my oldest friends. Don't forget we do business with his company. If Traggart has a letter from Hal, we'll have to spread ourselves. We'd better have him for dinner."

"I don't think he'll taste very good," Sidney wisecracked. "Do you, Laurie?"

WE'LL invite him to dinner and we'll put on something special, something extra special. I'll leave the details to you, Laurie. Stir up that no good Chink cook and see if you can't get some service."

"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. I aim to have dinner in town and see a movie tomorrow night." Laurie said it defiantly.

"You'll eat here and no nonsense!"

"Such a distinguished guest," Sidney drawled. "I wonder if he can do jigsaw puzzles. I'd better get Clem over to give the dinner a real Western touch. Which reminds me, Duke Traggart has made Old Man Cook a big offer for the Triangle V. Maybe we'll have the Cowboy King for a neighbor yet!"

It was after eight when Laurie heard the drum of hoofs outside on the lane. They slowed as she got up from the porch swing to see who it was. A man dismounted, tied his pony to the lane's fence and moved toward the house. In silhouette against the moonlight, Laurie saw it was Mex Dawson.

With a swift glance over her shoulder to make sure her father was still in the living room, she ran down the steps.

"Thought I'd mosey around tonight." Dawson's arm went around her. "Pretty swell out—all that moon and everything. Get the bay dressed and let's take a ride."

Laurie perched herself on the top rail of the lane's fencing. Somehow she wasn't in any mood for romance. Traggart's arrival the next night and what her father had said still rankled in her mind. She was annoyed, inwardly disturbed because she was being treated like a child, resentful because she had to cater to someone she was sure she despised.

"No ride, Mex. I'm tired."

He climbed up beside her. "Look, Laurie. I've got a heap of things to talk over with you. You know as well as I do how I feel about you."

"I should, you've told me often enough."

"I want you to make up your mind. I was never much of a hand for waitin' around. I'm crazy about you, Laurie. I've just got to have you. There ain't no two ways about it!"

The vibrant note in his voice struck her. Dawson's arm tightened around her like a steel band. She could hardly breathe, hardly think, hardly remember what her father had said about him. He kissed her the next minute, hard and urgently and her arms went up and linked about his neck.

"I don't know if I do love you!" Laurie whispered. "I don't know much about love. You—you do make me all thrilly and funny feeling—but is that really love, Mex?"

"It's just the same as I feel when I'm with you!"

A calf squealed somewhere off in the moon-silvered dark. Laurie squirmed out of his arms and dropped down from the fence top. As quickly as it had come, the queer emotion left her. She brushed back a loose strand of her tawny hair and pressed a hand over her racing heart.

"I—I'm going in. Good night, Mex!"

He caught her once more, gripping her shoulders, crushing her to him for another kiss.

"I'm not giving you up—ever! You're my

girl! Understand that—you're mine, Laurie —*mine!*"

SECRETLY, Laurie had to admit the dinner party next night wasn't half as bad as she thought it would be. Traggart had a sense of humor and was an amusing conversationalist. He didn't seem to take himself seriously, either. But Laurie was still prejudiced. She couldn't shake off the cynical sarcasm she had built up in her mind over the past weeks of listening to and laughing at the Golden Oats program.

Dinner over, while Sidney hunted up her mandolin and Clem went to work on the harmonica, Traggart pulled his chair around beside Laurie's.

"Moonlight on the sage," Traggart said, for her ears alone. "Care to take a walk?"

"No, thanks. I'm quite comfortable here."

In the gloom, his grey eyes were searching and inquisitive. He was so close to her that Laurie could feel his buckskin shoulder brush hers. She moved her gaze out to the lane, the empty corrals, the flat range land beyond.

"You don't like me—much, do you, Laurie?"

Traggart said it through the blend of mandolin and harmonica music, the *Buffalo Gal* going full blast.

"Should I? After all, I don't know you."

"Maybe we could get acquainted better if we took that walk," Traggart hinted.

Abruptly, Laurie made one of her split-second decisions. Jumping up, she walked toward the steps. Over her shoulder, she said indifferently, "All right, come on, if you want to walk."

She heard Sidney's significant giggle and felt her cheeks flush warmly when Duke Traggart joined her and they went down to the lane. To cover her confusion, Laurie said precisely:

"We raise Brahma cattle here. The Bar-B-O's the biggest spread in Kettle Creek Country. Granddad stocked this ranch years ago. We've got a reputation and we try to live up to it. There's the bunkhouse, that long building in the gloom, back of the corral. Over there's the blacksmith shop and—"

Traggart's hand caught hers. His grip was strong, but gentle. At his touch, something ran like quicksilver through Laurie. Anger, or indignation, she wasn't sure which.

"I'd rather talk about you," he said, his tone low. "Yesterday when I saw you ride up to Cutler's store and swing out of the saddle, I couldn't believe my eyes. I didn't think you were real."

Laurie looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"It's hard to say. You were so—so beautiful with the sun on your hair and in your eyes. I had to meet you. And I've been waiting all day just for tonight, just to see you."

"I don't like talk like that." Laurie started to walk a little faster. His hand still gripped her fingers and she couldn't shake it off. "I'm not a bit interested in what you think about me, Mr. Traggart."

His grip brought her to a standstill, midway down the lane. To the left was the branding corral making shadows at their feet. Overhead the moon sailed like a silver disk and faraway a coyote howled.

AGAIN, Laurie tried to get her hand free. This time there was a little, breathless strugggle. She never knew how it happened but then she was in his arms and Traggart had found the curved bow of her lips with his before Laurie could stop him. His kiss, hot and tempestuous, flamed on her tremulous mouth.

Anger blazed up within her. She yanked her hand away and pushed him from her, furious and shaken.

"That was a despicable thing to do!" Laurie's voice quivered. "I guess that's what eating Golden Oats does! I might have expected it from a cheap, imitation Westerner like you!"

"I love you!" He said it quietly, sincerely. "I fell in love with you yesterday! I knew the minute I saw you that you were the one I've been waiting for all my life! Laurie. I had to kiss you tonight! I'll always—"

But she wasn't listening.

Wheeling around, Laurie ran down the lane toward the ranch house. When she reached it she made an effort to control the storm within her. She couldn't let Sidney, her father or Clem know what had happened. She waited a minute or two until her breathing grew normal before she went up the steps and into the house. Chan Gale gave her a quizzical glance.

"Where's Traggart?"

"Wandering around, looking the property over." Laurie smothered a pretended yawn. "Think I'll turn in. I've got a bad headache."

In her moon-flooded room, she threw herself full length across the bed. Her temples were pounding. She pressed her cool palms against them, aware that Traggart had come back to the house and that his voice was blending with Chan Gale's downstairs. The Cowboy King had kissed her! Held her and kissed her against her will! No one had ever done that before—not even Mex—and, she vowed, no one ever would again!

But Traggart had told her he loved her. Laurie's red lips twisted. He loved her! She made her mouth into a mocking smile.

"Radio cowboy!" she said to herself, scornfully.

At breakfast the next morning, Chan Gale waited until Sidney had left the room. When he was alone with Laurie, Chan snapped his fingers at the Chinese houseboy.

"Beat it, Win. You savvy? Disappear like the ghosts of your honorable ancestors."

"Me go, Mist' Boss."

"Traggart asked me something last night, when he came back." Chan Gale clipped the end from a cigar. "He wants my permission to ask you to marry him. Kind of sudden like, isn't it?"

Laurie's mouth opened. She was sure she hadn't heard correctly. Wide-eyed, she stared across the table at her father, her heart missing a beat and then beginning to pound erratically.

"What—what did you say?"

"I told him it was up to you. If you're in love with him, that's all right with me. It's your life, after all, not mine."

"I hate him!" Laurie grated.

Gale puffed placidly at his cigar. "They say hate is sometimes a step toward love. First time I asked your mother to marry me she slapped my face. Come to think of it, she did the same thing the second time. But I just kept on tryin' and after a while I roped her."

Laurie bunched her napkin on the table. "He won't rope me now or ever! You were real, dad! He isn't! He's a—a faker—false alarm!"

HER FATHER blew a lazy smoke ring ring and shrugged. "Sidney and Clem are going over to Campbell's Crossing. Want to come into town with me, later? I'll blow you to lunch at the Mansion House."

Laurie's face lost some of its stormy, hard expression. She began to smile. Swiftly she went around and gently kissed the top of her father's grizzled grey head.

"That's a date, darling!" she told him.

It was almost two-thirty before they finished lunch. Chan Gale had some business at the Drover's Bank Building. He looked at his daughter with a frown.

"How about the car, honey? You want to use it to get back to the ranch? Mebbe I can get a lift out later."

"No, you keep it," Laurie said quickly. From the corner of her eye she saw Mex Dawson come out of the door of his feed store and recognized his coupé parked a little way down the street. "I'll be all right. I—I've got a few things to get in town. See you later, Dad."

Gale started off for the bank building at the same moment Mex Dawson crossed the street. His black eyes were bright and anticipative. Laurie waited for him to come up to her.

"Couldn't help hearin' what you said." Dawson reached for her hand. "Funny thing, I'm headin' out for the Circle Square, Heath's ranch. Goin' to collect a bill. How about a lift?"

"If it won't take you out of your way," Laurie murmured.

"Hop in," Dawson invited, when they crossed the street to his coupe. "I'll tell Sam I won't be back for a while."

A few minutes later Dawson stepped on the starter and the car rolled off. Laurie, curled up in the front seat, tilted her tawny head back against the worn leather upholstery. Her smoky blue eyes clouded. Suddenly, in fancy, she felt Duke Traggart's arms around here again, the scorch of his kiss. Something stirred in her heart, made her inwardly tremble. She tried desperately to analyze the emotion. It didn't make sense, she couldn't reason it out.

"Kind of quiet, Laurie. Got somethin' on your mind?"

The long lashes fringing her eyes went up and she smiled faintly at Dawson. "Just daydreaming."

The dusty road unwound and after a time Laurie saw they were on the trail leading to what was called the Conniford Water Hole. That lay south of Ellentown, the remnants of a ghost town. Six miles further away, the cattle center of of Meeker sprawled over the prairie, a thriving community and the county seat.

"Where are we going, Mex?" She straightened up. "This isn't the way to Heath's spread. This'll take us into Meeker."

Dawson nodded. "Reckon that's as good a place as any—for what I'm plannin'."

There was something in his voice that made her dart another quick look at him. Laurie's arched brows drew together in a puzzled frown. "I don't understand. What are you planning to do over at the county seat?"

"Marry you!"

Laurie's mouth opened. She peered at him, certain this was some kind of joke. It couldn't be real, he couldn't be serious. But the car was rolling on, the alkali sifting down on them in a thin haze. On through the ghost town and to Meeker!

"Be serious, Mex. I don't feel like joking today."

"I'm not jokin', Laurie. I never meant anything more in my life. Remember the other night? I told you then I'd never let you go or give you up!"

A tiny shock of alarm went through Laurie. He did mean it. She could see the jut of his jaw, the determined expression on his face and the excited blaze in the depths of his black eyes. At that moment a door seemed to open in Laurie's heart, letting in a flood of light. At that moment doubt and indecision vanished, fading like shadows before a rising sun.

IN A FLASH she understood that she had never been in love with Mex. He had fascinated her, probably because he was older and had been out in the world. And because he had flattered her and made love to her. She knew now, clearly and vividly, it wasn't Dawson. Laurie felt a quiver of apprehension, a tingle of fear that had never touched her before. Vainly, she tried to assure herself that nobody could marry a girl who wasn't willing. All she had to do was tell them at Meeker who she was and what had happened.

It was as simple as that. Or was it?

The coupé began to slow down. They had reached the Water Hole, its dilapidated huddle of shacks and shanties reared up like grey stone deposits on the tableland of the flat terrain. Dawson stopped the car in front of what had once been a saloon. In half obliterated letters the name, *Golden Nugget,* was still over its deserted door. Laurie shivered when she looked from its broken, yawning windows up and into Dawson's dark face.

"I'll never marry you! I don't love you, Mex. You'd better turn around and take me home."

"I figured mebbe you'd say that." He moved his wide shoulders. "Could be you've gone and fallen in love with somebody else. Fair enough. But before he gets you, mebbe I can show you how much I really do care about you!"

He twisted around in the seat. The fire in his eyes smouldered ominously. Quickly as she could, Laurie had the door beside her open and was sliding through it. Her heel caught on the running board and she would have pitched to the rocky ground if Dawson hadn't caught her.

He crushed her to him, kissing her hair, her forehead, trying to find her lips. She heard him mumbling, saying things that beat against her brain like tiny fists.

"I love you! I told you I'd never let you go and I'm not going to! Kiss me, Laurie! What's the use of actin' like this? You—"

"Take your hands off me!" Her voice was shrill, shutting out the hopelessness she felt. "You'll pay for this, Mex Dawson! You'll be sorry—"

She broke off, suddenly going rigid. Over Dawson's shoulder she saw something—something in the distance, coming closer and closer. She shut here eyes, certain they were tricking her, that it was a mirage. When she opened them again she caught the sparkle of chromium and glass.

A car was racing toward them!

"If I kiss you," Laurie heard herself saying, "will you take me home?"

"Sure!"

"Then—then let me go for a minute—until I get my breath!"

He released her and she began to retreat, walking slowly back until the wall of the deserted saloon stopped her.

STEP by step, Dawson followed. When she could go no further, his hand reached out to circle her waist. He pulled her roughly to him and leaned to kiss her. But as he did he heard the pant of the car coming toward them, let Laurie go and wheeled about.

The car had stopped and someone was getting out. Through the golden haze swirling fantastically before Laurie's vision, she had the impression of a tall figure before, as if in a dream, she heard Duke Traggart's voice.

"What do you think you're up to, Dawson?"

Her legs began to feel rubbery about then. Laurie leaned against the wall, certain it was all a nightmare. It couldn't actually be happening! Duke Traggart, in his fancy clothes, walking toward Mex Dawson as if he could slap him down.

"Traggart! What the—"

"Up to your old tricks, Mex!" Traggart's voice was like steel. "Can't leave the ladies alone! That girl at the Flying Arrow, the one who had you run out of town! And—"

Dawson snarled an oath and lunged, his fist heading for Traggart. Laurie gave a strangled cry. Dizzily, she saw Traggart side-step with lightning-speed. Then his right hand came up in a feint, and as Mex tried to block that blow, Traggart's left connected with Mex's chin. Choking on an oath, Mex dropped.

Laurie didn't see anything more. Abruptly, her legs gave way under her too and the sun was blotted out by a swirling black cloud. . . .

When she opened her eyes again she was in the front seat of the big car with the sparkling chromium. Duke Traggart, chafing her wrists, stopped with a breath of relief. Laurie sat up, looking for the coupé and Dawson. But they were gone, and so was the huddle of the ghost town.

"Feel all right?" Duke Traggart's voice wasn't entirely steady. "I drove you back a bit. Didn't want you to see that hombre when you opened your eyes again."

"I—I'm all right—now." Laurie sat up. "What happened?"

"It was right after you left your father in town. I saw you get in Dawson's car and thought I'd better follow. I've known him for some time—since the days I used to be a cowpoke down Texas way. And because I knew what his reputation is I thought I'd better just drift along to make sure nothing happened to you."

Laurie drew a quivering breath. Traggart faced her, his grey eyes smiling again and a strange, tingling thrill began to creep through her.

"I—I'm sorry about last night." she whispered. "I mean, running away from you. I didn't know then what I know now."

He leaned to her and in the bright sunshine his gaze was expressive of all that was in his heart.

"What didn't you know, sweetheart?"

"That you're no imitation! That," Laurie breathed, happily, "the same thing must have happened to me that happened to you the other day. I—I mean—love at first sight!"

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Can rattlesnakes swim?

2. In *Little Joe the Wrangler,* the old cowboy song written by Jack Thorp, why had Little Joe run away from home?

3. Is a *cantina* (kahn-TEE-nah) a saloon, a canteen, or a Mexican song?

4. Clinton P. Anderson, Secretary of Agriculture in President Truman's cabinet, comes from what cow country state?

5. Next to English, what language is most widely spoken in the West?

6. What state, once famous for its cattle-shipping towns, has three nicknames: the Sunflower State, the Central State, and the Prairie State?

7. What does a cowboy mean when he says he "toothed a horse"?

8. The following places were named for men of what profession: Kearney, Nebr.; Miles City, Mont.; Sheridan, Wyo.; Reno, Nev.; Custer, S.D.; and Pike's Peak in Colorado?

9. What are kyacks?

10. Western ponies, by men who's sot 'em, are often said to have lots of bottom. What do they mean by "bottom?"

You will find the answers to these questions on page 105. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

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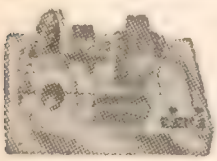

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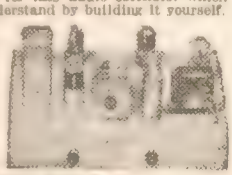

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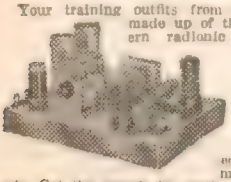

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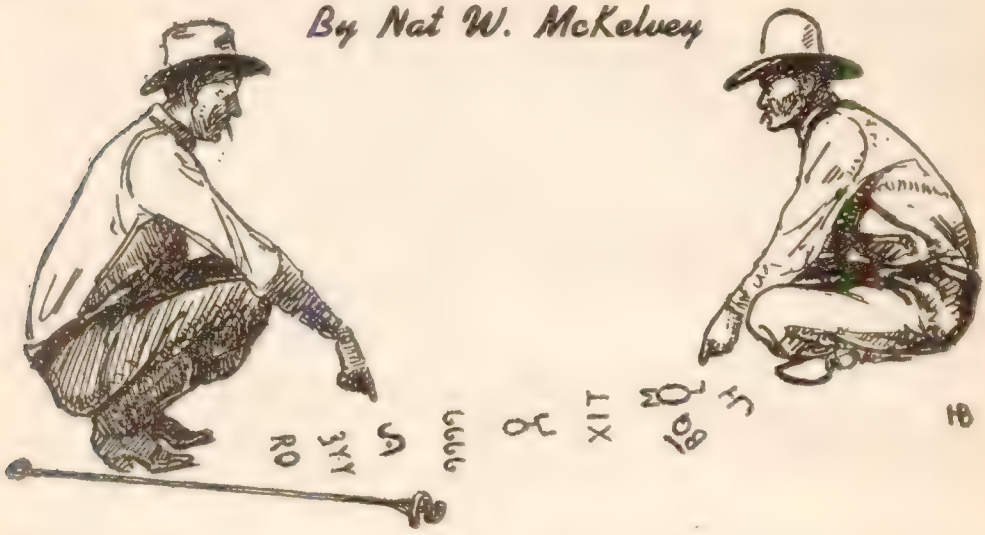
History in Blazing Brands

By Nat W. McKelvey



NOT ALL Western history is preserved in books. Some of it is ingeniously recorded on the hides of range cattle and in the carefully shaped metal branding irons that burn those hides.

Back in 1885 a lusty young cowpuncher named Burk Burnett drew hands in an all-night poker session that was destined to change the history of the Texas cattle country. As the night wore on and runs of flushes, straights and triplets continued to fill Burk's horny paws, he could scarcely guess that his phenomenal luck was to found a cattle empire, endow a university, bring in a fabulous oil field, name a Texas town, and establish one of the most renowned brands in the history of the West.

Rising in front of Burk, like a prophetic pyramid, lay all the material wealth of the rancher who alone remained to contest the puncher's luck.

"By glory, Burnett," the man rasped, "I'll bet my ranch and every cow critter on it against your pile—on the next hand! Do you take it?"

Softly, Burnett agreed. "All right, ranny. It's winner take all."

Burnett watched the flash of the cards as his adversary dealt hastily. Burk didn't seem perturbed that his opponent stood pat. Calling for one card, the cowboy drawled:

"Show 'em, feller."

Down on the board went the two hands. Burk saw the rancher's sagging shoulders, saw the blood drain from his face. Kindly, he waited until the beaten cowman slipped away in the night, to be forgotten alike by Burk Burnett and by history.

At dawn, running iron in hand, Burk began branding his newly acquired stock. With the passing years, Burnett's ranch prospered. A lucky plunger struck oil on Burk's land. Millions of dollars flowed into the Texas Panhandle from Burk Burnett's spreading oil fields, and his cattle roamed as far west as the notorious town of Borger.

Oil derricks, trucks, wagons, automobiles, and water tanks began to appear with Burk's brand. To Texas Christian University the untutored puncher gave a sizable endowment.

On Sept. 22, 1885, Burk went to the office of the recorder for Wichita County, there to register the brand that had sprung full blown from a poker hand: 6666. Today, on 300,000 acres of prime gazing land, nearly 25,000 head of cattle still wear Burnett's brand. And up near the Oklahoma line sits the town of Burkburnett, whose 3,200 inhabitants devote themselves to cattle raising and to perpetuation of the Burnett legend.

Burnett's creation of the 6666 brand is but one of the many intriguing chapters in the development of the red-hot history of the range. From the cowhead brand of *Señor*

Cabeza de Vaca, the man who founded the American cattle industry, to the famous Running W of the million and a half acre King Ranch, cattle brands have continued to flow in an endless stream from the romantic imaginations of men on horseback.

Not long ago Buck Conway, an Arizona rancher, hollered for a "hot iron." On behalf of his son, Corp. Bud Conway, fighting in Europe, he branded a herd of 122 animals with the IKE connected. Of course, the brand was created in honor of "Ike" Eisenhower.

Following December 7, 1941, cowmen from the Mississippi to the Pacific were busy branding new herds with some variation of PH. In Texas brands alone, Pearl Harbor was commemorated seventy-four times.

Gage Hannover, a New Mexico rancher, helped pay tribute to the late President Roosevelt by registering the FDR 4 brand. Among other figures and agencies in modern history, brands take cognizance of the "V for Victory" symbol, Gen. MacArthur, the OWI, the OPA, Wendell Willkie and even Adolph Hitler. As the outgrowth of a political argument, a skinny steer in California bears nine swastikas and a HELL HITLER burned on both his sides.

Like any language, branding follows definite principles. First in the brand alphabet is the ordinary line, called a "rail." Two of these lines running parallel are called "two rails." But three together are "stripes."

A short rail is a "bar." A tilted rail is called a "slash." When flattened, a circle becomes "goose egg" or "mashed O." A rail with feet on it becomes a "bench." Cattle brands feature many symbols: hearts, circles, trees, tracks, houses, initials, numerals, heads, lodge insignia, and, in these hectic times, even airplanes.

Sometimes, in different sections of the country, a brand name varies. In Texas, the famous Rocking T is called the T Anchor. The "IV" is not called the "I V" but "Roman Four." On the other hand, the "LX" is called, not Roman Sixty, but plain "L X."

Brands are read from top to bottom as Bar Six; from outside to inside as Triangle D; from left to right, as T Bar O. Usually burned on the animal's left hip, brands are made with a running iron or stamping iron. The running iron, a short iron bar with one end bent and slightly rounded, is used much as an artist uses a pencil for freehand drawing. Much skill is required to "run on" a brand. Therefore, most brands of this type are simple.

However, stamping irons, with the entire brand affixed to the head like a signet, are often rather intricate. The famous "MOL" brand, better known as the "Kitty Kat," can be made with a stamping iron. Take a pencil, draw a large circle, affix an "M" to the top of it and an "L" to the bottom and you will see the resemblance to the rear view of a cat.

Brands should be designed so that rustling "rewrite" men will find them difficult to change. One of the most famous brand switching cases in history involved the Ten in Texas spread, ramrodded by Col. B. H. Campbell, better known as "Barbecue" from his own brand, the Bar B Q.

Ten in Texas had the difficult-to-change brand, XIT. But a clever "rewrite" man finally developed a switch. First he registered the Star Cross as his own brand and then began to make it from XIT by running the arms of a five-pointed star over those letters. The "I," which appeared in the middle of the completed Star, was crossed to finish the Star Cross idea.

Then there was the crusty Arizona jigger who registered the XS brand. He burned it on every cow he stole, putting it on what he considered the excess—"XS"—cattle of his neighbors.

Brands in the West are more than just marks on cattle. Many a time they tell a story about the owner himself.

Another rewrite man tackled cows wearing the IC brand. Thinking himself humorously clever, the rustler stole the critters, rebranding them ICU. Not to be swindled, or even outdone, the owner of the beeves took them back, once more rebranding them. By way of warning, he added one letter to the brand, making it read: ICU2.

BUT NOT all humorous branding history has come from crooks. One gent who borrowed money to start his ranch registered as his brand the I-O, "I Bar O." Another rancher, W. E. Daniels, took a squint in the mirror and coined the 2FAT brand. And over in Palo Pinto County, Texas, T. J. Walker, in a sour mood, recorded FOOL as his brand. Said he, "Any gent who tries to make money raising cow critters is certainly a fool." Hardly had he begun using this brand when he had to go gunning for practical jokers who thought it amusing to burn over the "F" of Walker's brand to make it a "B" on his bulls.

In any campfire "augerin' match" where brands are the topic, some mighty famous names are bound to crop up. For instance, Don Luis Terrazas who owned the largest cattle spread the world has ever seen. His brand, designated "Skillet of Snakes" by American cowboys, was a pleasing capital "T" with a curving, snake-like tail descending from its middle.

Will Rogers' personal brand was the andiron or dogiron, looking much like the variety that holds up the big logs in any ranch house fireplace.

The Duke of Windsor, former King of England, and until recently Governor of the Bahama Islands, had two brands. On his acreage near Calgary, Canada, when Prince of Wales he enjoyed himself by personally burning his stock with his famous Three Feathers and EP brands. The Three Feathers went on the right shoulder of his horses while his cows carried an EP—for Edward, Prince—burned on their ribs.

Not all branding has been done on livestock. Possibly untrue, but nonetheless a favorite story, is the saga of the three hungry cowboys who invaded a chuck wagon while the cook was away. Seized by a fit of deviltry at the end of their meal, the first two hands grabbed a pair of the cook's pants, branding them thus: WE8—"We ate." The third hungry puncher, seeing the work of his predecessors, added his own humor to the cook's trousers: ME2.

When the cook returned, the branded pants so raised his ire that he snatched up a sixgun and embarked on a manhunt. One by one, he caught up with the pranksters, covered them, and dangled them head downward from a tree at the end of his lariat. Then, heating a running iron, he applied it to the jokers' britches, regardless of the fact that they were still filling them. The cook's brand, a perfect retort, was 3YY, reading, "Three too wise."

More tragic is the true story of Jess Hitson, of Colorado. Alone on the range one day, he had just roped a calf and was heating a running iron to brand it, when Indians attacked him. Before he was overpowered and killed, Jess used his red-hot running iron to leave an indelible record of events. Three years after Hitson's death, Colorado ranchers caught a steer bearing this obituary brand: "7-4-68 Indians Hot as Hell J H."

Whatever has touched deeply the lives and emotions of cattlemen, those things have been preserved in brands: broken hearts, covered wagons, miners' picks, wagon wheels, and the little red schoolhouse. Frequently, the only available record of minor social and political trends is in the red-hot history of the range.

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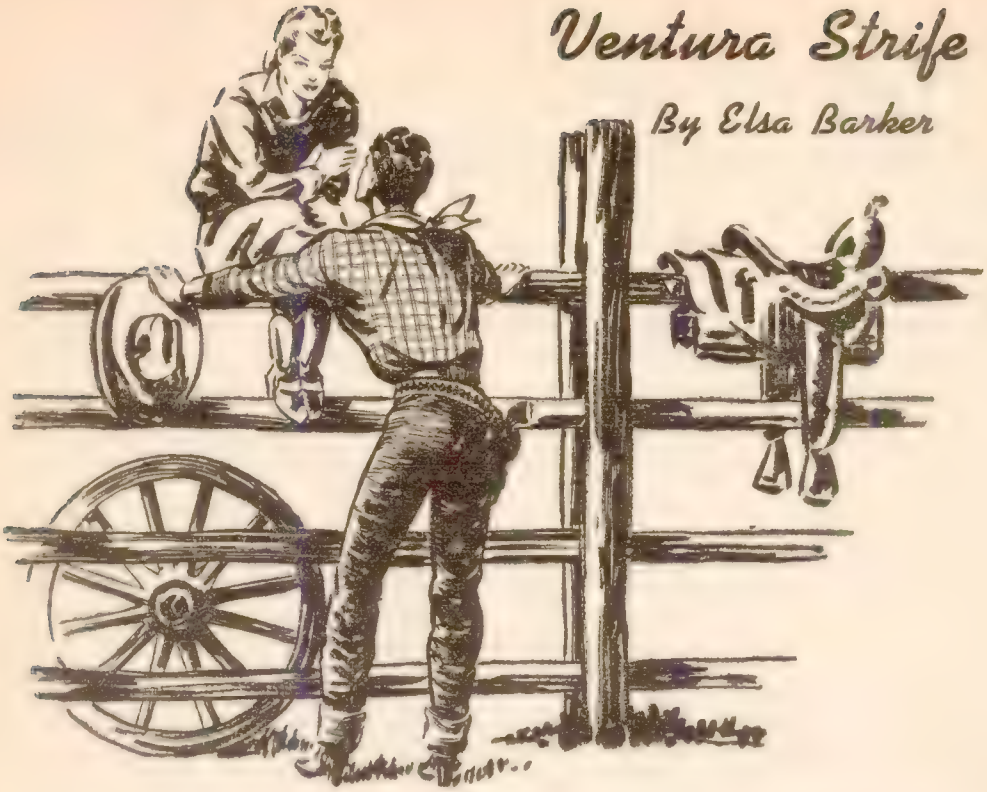
Ventura Strife

By Elsa Barker



THE STORY SO FAR:

WALT HOLLENGER and JUDY RAYNOLDS are on the trail of the murderer of Judy's uncle, PETE RAYNOLDS, who owned the wealthy Ventura property. His adopted son, DWIGHT MITCHELL, is the probable heir to the Ventura. He is desperately loved by BELLA GAMEL, Pete's secretary-companion and daughter of a worthless peddler, JOE GAMEL. But since Judy's arrival Dwight has been less attentive to Bella. Also two attempts have been made on Judy's life.

JOHNNY HUME, one of Walt's men, has been acting suspiciously, and Walt thinks he knows something. Walt and Judy trust only DON LUIS MORALES, an old Spanish nobleman who was Pete's friend. When SHERIFF EMBRY'S brother is killed from ambush, Walt finds proof that Joe Gamel is the murderer, and he and Judy get Joe and take him to Don Luis's cabin where Walt tries to make Joe talk. Joe says nothing, and just after Walt and Judy leave in Joe's cart, Bella comes in to see Don Luis. She sees Joe's wallet on the table and knows he is there, and when Don Luis goes out of the room, she plugs the Don's gun with clay. Then she leaves, and Joe manages to grab the gun, not knowing it is fixed. He points it at Don Luis and pulls the trigger, and it blows up in his face and kills him. Don Luis starts out to find Judy and Walt and tell them who he suspects is the real murderer of Pete.

In the meantime, the sheriff has caught Walt and Judy, and is preparing to hang Walt without benefit of trial, on the charge that he is responsible for both murders. Dwight, under pretense of wanting to talk to her, has taken Judy off with him.

CONCLUSION

JUDY RAYNOLDS was beginning to be nagged by doubt. When she had made her dicker with Dwight Mitchell and ridden away from Walt Hollenger, she had thought she was doing the right thing. Sheriff Embry represented the law, and to her that meant Walt was assured of a square deal if there wasn't too much outside pressure put on the sheriff.

But now she wondered if Dwight hadn't given in too easily. He had seemed to have some powerful motive for wanting Walt dead, and how could that motive have been changed by what she had offered. But in spite of her doubts, she could not quite make up her mind to risk what she had gained, by going back to Walt.

She reined up her horse and waited tensely when they came to Don Luis' little house. Dwight looked at Clint Barrow and Miguel Pineda. "All right, boys. This is where you get off. Go on back to the ranch. The party's

over. Miss Raynolds and I will be along in about an hour."

Clint Barrow sat quiet for a moment. He looked hard at Dwight Mitchell, then he shrugged. "All right, boss. If that's the way you want it."

Judy was watching close but she could see no hint of an undercover meaning either in their looks or words. After they had gone, she turned to Dwight. "You'll keep your promise? You'll stop hounding Walt? You won't try to kill him again?"

He spurred his horse close alongside hers, and caught the hand that was resting on the saddle horn. "I promise, Judy," he said earnestly, and when she looked into his eyes it was hard for her to hold onto her doubts. "Judy—what I want to know is—"

Fearing then what he was going to ask her, and not wanting to anger him by her answer, she drew her hand away. "We'd better hurry, Dwight. It'll be dark before long."

She started to step out of the saddle, but Dwight was too quick for her. He swung down, and caught her as her foot touched the ground. He put his hands lightly on her shoulders.

"Judy, listen to me a minute."

She flushed and tried to move away, but his hands tightened. "Dwight—please—I—"

"You don't have to give me an answer now—but you've got to listen."

Judy Raynolds didn't like being pushed around, but she tried to hold on to the anger she felt rising in her.

"All right," she said shortly. "But take your hands down and make it snappy."

It wasn't exactly an encouraging opening for a proposal, and she hadn't meant it to be. Dwight flushed.

"Just this—Judy," he said stubbornly. "I don't know whether Uncle Pete made a new will or not. If he did I've no idea what is in it. Maybe he left everything to you—maybe he left it to both of us. Maybe there ain't a new will an' the old one leaving it to me still stands. But whatever we find when we look through those papers, I want you to know this—that I love you—and want you to marry me. It don't matter a damn to me whether you're the heiress to the Ventura—or whether you ain't got a dime."

In spite of what she knew him to be, and in spite of the things she suspected he had done in the past few days, Judy couldn't help being stirred a little by such a proposal—until she remembered that Dwight wasn't risking much. If he was the heir to the Ventura he could afford to marry a poor girl—if she was the heiress, he could certainly afford to marry a rich one.

She made herself smile at him. "Thanks, Dwight." Then she added coolly: "My answer will have to wait a few days. Until I find out for sure whether you were honest in your promise that Walt Hollenger would not be harmed."

She was watching him closely now, and she felt her heart leap with fear at the startled look that came momentarily to his eyes. "But Judy—you—"

"Were you lying to me, Dwight" she asked sharply.

"No, of course not! I swear the Ventura hands won't touch him—but—"

Suddenly a woman's shrill, horror-stricken scream cut through the air like a knife, seeming to come from the Morales house above them.

"Bella!" Dwight said and ran up the hill. Judy hurried after him.

After that one scream there was no sound. They found Bella in the kitchen, slumped in a chair, staring at the body of her father in white-faced horror.

"Bella! My God—it's Joe!" Dwight stopped stock still in the doorway.

Judy dropped to her knees and put her arms around the other girl. She wanted to tell Bella she was sorry, but knowing what she did about Joe Gamel, the words stuck.

Bella's slim body was stiff and resisting. After a moment she pushed Judy's hands down and stood up. She shoved the heavy fair hair off her forehead with a nervous gesture.

"Maybe—it's better this way," she said, and then her voice choked. "Only it was such a shock, coming on him like that. I—I—" She broke off, suddenly ran across the room and threw her arms around Dwight's neck. Sobs shook her shoulders.

Dwight looked embarrassed. He dropped an arm loosely around her and patted her shoulder. "I don't see what you're raisin' such a fuss about," he said awkwardly. "He was a pain in the neck to you while he was alive."

Judy was trying not to watch or listen. She looked at the body on the floor and then her eyes drifted to the gun on the floor close by Joe Gamel's outstretched hand. A gun with a swelled barrel and bursted breech.

Stepping around the body she picked it up and turned it over in her hand. She rubbed her finger over the beautiful walnut butt with its delicate silver inlay, the flowery entwined initials "LM". She touched the end of the barrel and a little clod of clay dropped off in her hand. She laid the gun down again and caught her breath sharply.

Bella drew back from Dwight's arms, first wiping her eyes on his bandana. "I'm sorry I was such a baby, Dwight. Now—we've got to hurry. You take the horses and tie them in the pines back of the house where they'll be out of sight, yet so we can get to them quickly if we need to." She put her arms around him again, and smiled triumphantly. "The papers are here, darling, in this house!"

DWIGHT moved back away from her. "I know," he said. "Judy told me. She came back to help me look for them."

"*Judy* told you!" Bella repeated it softly. She turned, smiling faintly toward the other girl and Judy was suddenly frightened. She fought desperately for self control, but it seemed to her that the room was full of danger. It was all around her. She could smell it, feel it soaking into every pore of her body.

Bella was watching her intently. She made herself return the gaze steadily, and then she spoke.

"That's Don Luis' gun there on the floor—the one that killed your father," Judy's voice sounded stiff and strange in her own ears. "I saw him cleaning it not more than two hours ago. But the barrel was plugged when it was shot—like mine was the other day. Bella—you knew Uncle Pete's papers were in this house." She heard her voice rising, the words pouring out of her in a horror-filled, almost incoherent jumble. "You must have been here and talked to Don Luis—after Walt and I left. You—you stuffed that gun full of clay. You meant to kill Don Luis just like you meant to kill me!"

Bella smiled at her. "You catch on quick, don't you darling?" She didn't look sweet and gentle now. She looked smoothly evil and hateful.

Judy's hand dropped to the holster at her hip, and came away empty. With a dull shock she remembered now that the sheriff had taken it from her. With Bella still holding her eyes, she backed away until she felt the wall solidly at her back.

Dwight spoke sharply. "Bella, I told you to leave Judy alone. Did you plug her gun?"

Bella turned to him. "You run move the horses, dear," she suggested. "I'll do what has to be done here."

Dwight shook his head. "I'm not going to let you hurt Judy!"

Bella's face twisted. "You think you love her, don't you?"

"Yes. I'm going to marry her."

Bella laughed. It had an ugly sound, hard and contemptuous.

"You—marry her! Have you clean lost your wits? Look at her face! Put your arm around her and feel her cringe! You're tarred with the same black brush that I am now, my pretty man! She loathes you! I wonder how much fun it will be to have a wife that sickens every time you touch her!"

"Damn you, Bella! Shut your filthy mouth!" he said furiously.

She shrugged. "Don't be a fool, Dwight!" she said sharply. "I'm your kind! She isn't! You used to love me. You're just tired of me now because we've been tied together in this dirty business so long. But one of these days it'll all be over. We can forget these bad times. Then we can live just like any other couple. You'll love me again some day, Dwight. I promise you that. We'll be happy together."

She took a step toward him and raised her hands as if to put them on his shoulders again. He backed away from her, loathing in his face.

"Keep back, Bella," he warned her harshly. "You think because you've blackened me to Judy that I'll turn to you again now. God knows I've been a fool, but I'm not that big a one! I can't stand the sight of you. I can't stand the thought of what new murders you may be planning even now!"

Bella's face had whitened. Now she swung her eyes briefly around on Judy and back again.

"You know what letting her hear all this means, don't you, Dwight?" she asked calmly.

FOR just a second he looked shaken, as if anger were draining out of him and fear taking its place, then he spoke defiantly. "I was a decent kid once, before you got your hooks into me. Before you got me to smoking that filthy weed. I'm goin' to do one decent thing more before I die. Judy, get on your horse an' ride fast to the sheriff! If you hurry you may be in time to stop him from hangin' Walt Hollenger!"

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Judy gasped, then got going. Bella's voice, like a whiplash stopped her.

"Wait!" She was still looking at Dwight and her hand was resting lightly on the butt of her gun. "I swapped guns with you a minute ago, Dwight, when I was staging that big crying scene over my father. That one you've got in your hand has got its barrel plugged! Do you want to risk shooting it?" Her own gun came out and swung on Judy. "Stay where you are! I was expecting something like this when you came in together."

Judy stopped, desperately eyeing the door that she knew was too far for her to reach before Bella could shoot her down.

Bella's gun was on Judy, but when she spoke it was to Dwight, and her voice carried the whip of authority.

"It's time to stop this nonsense, Dwight. I've risked too much to lose everything now because of this pretty-faced little flibbertygibbet. We've wasted a lot of time talking. We've got to hurry. We'll hide Judy's body back up on the hill. You can get it later and dump it over the cliffs on Escabroso Mountain. Nobody will ever find it there, and if *she* disappears they'll have no evidence against you." She smiled contemptuously. "If your nerves are shattered—smoke a cigarette! A little marihuana always helps when you get an attack of conscience!"

Suddenly Dwight Mitchell dropped into a chair by the table and buried his face in his hands. Judy stared in horror at the shaking husk of what had been a big, blustery man. Not until this moment did she realize how much she had been counting on him to save her from Bella's vindictive hate.

Bella's eyes blazed with triumph. But even in that brief moment when she had everything going her way, she couldn't resist a chance to gloat, to prove her superior smartness.

"I thought that would work," she said, and swooped to pick the gun from Dwight's nerveless fingers. "His gun wasn't plugged, of course."

In the instant that she bent over, Judy acted. She sprang forward. Her hands caught under the edge of the table, turned it on its side, then gave it a sudden shove with everything she had. It caught Bella on the shoulder, rocked her backwards off balance. She squeezed the trigger and the bullet shattered through the

window over Judy's shoulder. Judy dropped to her knees behind the table. Her face contorted with hate, Bella fired again.

SUDDENLY the deputy called Slim threw down his cigarette. The other man was out in the *vega* taking an unreasonably long time about catching one of Joe Gamel's gentle horses.

"Hell—let's get this sorry business over with!" Slim growled. "While we're still mad. I ain't much on stringin' up a man as cold-blooded as you'd butcher a hog."

He took a step forward to grind the cigarette under his boot toe and for a second his body covered Walt Hollenger from the sheriff's gun.

In that split second before he acted, Walt understood one thing clearly. They hadn't really intended to hang him at all, but they had meant for him to think so. They were offering him this scant chance to make a break, and then they meant to shoot him—a prisoner trying to escape.

Nevertheless, scant though it was, it was his chance, and he grabbed at it.

He jumped for Slim. The long cowboy had expected it and was ready for him. He pivoted on his heel, ducked and swung his body sideways. Walt's clutching fingers caught at his belt, and yanked him back, at the same instant that a breath of hot lead from the sheriff's six-gun fanned across his cheek.

Slim raised his gun and Walt chopped it down, hitting hard enough that it went spinning to the ground. Slim's left fist hit him hard over the belt buckle and Walt grunted as wind swooshed out of him.

His own swing at Slim's chin landed glancingly. Slim's head snapped back, but he came in ready for more. Walt dived for a clinch, threw both arms about the wiry young posseman, and held on tight.

While he struggled with Slim, one corner of his mind was aware that both the sheriff's and the other deputy's guns were searching for a sure target without endangering Slim. That same corner of his mind was aware, too, that sooner or later they would get it.

At that instant, Johnny Hume's voice, high and excited, but doubly deadly for that very reason, spoke:

"Drop that gun, Embry! You too, Shorty! I've got you both covered!"

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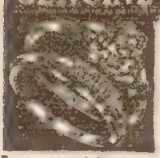

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For just a second Walt Hollenger's muscles went slack with the shock of surprise. He didn't believe in miracles, but it seemed to him nothing short of miraculous that Johnny Hume should show up here now.

Then he let Slim break away from the clinch. His right swung upward in a punch that had a hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle behind it. It cracked against his jaw, and Slim staggered backward and sat down.

Walt swooped for the sixgun Slim had dropped and turned grinning toward Johnny.

"Good work, kid."

Yesterday or a week ago, Johnny would have bubbled over with pride in himself. Today, sick as he was, he took it in stride. Today he had grown to man's size.

"You all right, Walt?"

"Sure." Walt backed away from the posse, toward Johnny. Inside his shirt he could feel his wound bleeding again, but to hell with it. He saw how white the kid looked, he saw the lump as big as a hen's egg high on his forehead. "You been hurt again, kid?"

Johnny shrugged. "Nothing to speak of. Mitchell got my horse. I fell on my head an' got knocked out or I'd have been here a long time ago."

Walt grinned. "You couldn't have come at a better time," he said dryly. "Now I'm goin' to hogtie these jaspers good so they can't get away, then I'm goin' to leave 'em with you. I've got some other business that needs tendin' to, pronto. Somethin' must have happened to Don Luis. I left Joe Gamel with him a couple of hours ago, but I can't figger how Mitchell and the sheriff knew so soon that I was in the wagon—unless Joe got loose."

HE WAS working fast, yanking a piece of lass rope tight around the sheriff's fat wrists, as he talked. He didn't see the grim look that came into Johnny Hume's young face.

"Bella told 'em," Johnny said quietly.

Walt raised his head. "Bella?"

"Yeah. I was follerin' her. I caught up with her up yonder on the ridge. She told me."

"How'd she know?"

Johnny shrugged. "That dame knows *all* the answers," he said bitterly. "An' you don't need to be in such an all fired hurry. Joe Gamel's dead, an' I reckon Don Luis is all right. At least I saw tracks that I took to be

his, headin' off across the short cut trail to your place."

Walt had finished tying up the sheriff and started on Slim. Now he stopped long enough to stare at Johnny's long back as he bent busily over the other deputy. "Joe Gamel dead?"

"Yeah. It looked like he'd had a gun an' started to use it an' it blowed up in his face."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Walt said it slowly. He turned it over in his mind, then gave up trying to figure it out. He gave a final yank to the rope on Slim's wrists and started on his ankles.

"It wasn't Don Luis I was worried about, anyhow. I was thinkin' of Judy Raynolds. She went off with Dwight Mitchell an' I've got an idea what she had in mind."

Johnny grunted. "Take the advice of one ol' man to another, he said sourly. "You're wastin' your time worryin' about any dame. I never saw one yet that couldn't lie her way out of the back room of hell!"

"So that's the way it is?"

"That's the way it is!" Johnny's young voice was hard and bitter. "An' don't ask me questions! I'll get over it, I reckon—but it sure galls me to know I been played for a sucker by a—"

"Murderess!" Walt finished for him.

Johnny winced. "I guess so. She sent me around to warn you that Dwight was comin'—then had him open up on me the first chance he got! I reckon I knew what she was all the time, only I tried to keep myself from thinkin' it!

Walt had the most of the picture now, and mindful of Johnny's feelings he didn't ask any more questions. He finished tying Slim in jig time, then stepped across the sheriff's horse.

"Take it easy, Johnny," he said. "You're sick an' liable to pass out most any minute, but I got 'em tied up so they ain't goin' to make you any trouble. I figger Rusty or Don Luis is likely to be along before long now."

Johnny nodded. "I'll be all right. If you see Bella, tell her I'm still alive—an' able to talk!"

WALT had known, as soon as he had time to think it over, where Judy had gone with Dwight Mitchell. There was only one dicker that she could make with the young heir to the Ventura that would interest him now. She must have promised to help

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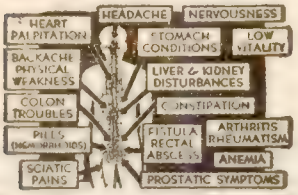

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him find Pete Raynolds' missing papers, and in so turning over to him any new will that might have been made she was at the same time giving up her chance to own the Ventura Ranch.

He rode fast, spurring the sheriff's big horse mercilessly. It would likely take them some time to find the hidden safe. If he hurried he would be in time, unless Bella got there too and made more trouble.

Where the shortcut trail cut off over a low humpback of piney ridge toward his ranch, he saw Rusty McGowan coming fast with Don Luis trailing him by fifty yards. Walt took off his hat and waved to be sure they recognized him, but kept on going.

He had reined up his horse below the old Don's *casita* and was tying him to the hitch-rack, when he heard the first shot.

His long legs carried him up the crudely laid rock steps at a buck-jumping run, while fear made his heart congeal into a block of ice. Two more shots followed in quick succession, and then there came a woman's high, wailing, heart-broken cry.

Walt flung open the kitchen door. For a moment the overturned table and chairs blocked off his view of everything but Joe Gamel's body. He heard a girl sob, and he took a quick step forward.

Bella Gamel was sitting on the floor with Dwight Mitchell's head in her lap. Tears were streaking down her cheeks, and her shoulders rocked back and forth in a paroxysm of genuine grief.

Around the other edge of the table a dark, tousled head poked itself up cautiously. Then Judy Raynolds jumped to her feet with a glad little cry. "Walt! Oh Walt—you're safe!"

His arm went around her and held her tight to his side, but he kept his eyes on Bella and Dwight. "You all right?"

"Yes."

He left her then to go and stand over Dwight. Bella looked up at him, her face empty and desolate. "I—I shot him," she said brokenly. "I—I didn't mean to, but I did."

"She tried to shoot *me*," Judy said quietly. "Dwight saved me. He threw himself in front of her."

There was the quick clatter of other running steps on the stones outside, then Rusty McGowan and Don Luis crowded into the room. Don Luis gave a shocked cry. He went over

and knelt beside Bella, laying a hand on her shoulder.

"Why did you do these things, Bella?"

She raised her head. "You won't understand, any of you," she said dully, "but I may as well tell you now. I never had anything. I was nobody, worse than nobody. I was dirty Joe Gamel's daughter. Then Dwight fell in love with me, and I with him. Pete Raynolds took me in—gave me a job—made me like one of the family. I began to have dreams of some day being the mistress of the Ventura."

SHE caught her breath on a sob, then went on. "Dwight began to get tired of me. I knew it and I got panicky. I tried to think of something I could do to hold him. I had learned a lot about drugs from my father, so I began slipping marihuana in Dwight's smoking tobacco. Then he'd do the things I wanted him to. I wanted him to be afraid to leave me, afraid not to marry me. We put slow poison in Pete Raynolds' food, so we could inherit the ranch quicker—but he seemed to be getting suspicious. Then Judy showed up, and we had to act fast. Uncle Pete quarrelled with Walt. I saw the letter he was writing and it seemed like a good chance. So we killed him."

She sigher deeply. "I thought I was so smart, but it didn't work. Dwight was afraid of me all right—but he began to hate me, too. And I—I really loved him. But you wouldn't understand that."

Don Luis stood up. "No," he said coldly. "We can understand not having money, but we can't understand good people turning evil to get it as you have!"

Bella's head flashed up. "You're a great one to talk!" she said scornfully. "You're Don Luis Morales! You're used to having people bow and scrape for the privilege of being asked to drink a glass of wine with you. Of course you don't understand!"

Don Luis shook his head at her. "Nobody hated you, Bella!"

"Anyhow, not till lately," put in Rusty McGowan dryly.

Bella looked at him. "Oh—shut up!" she said wearily. She turned to Don Luis. "Get me a glass of water, will you?"

He gave his courtly little bow. "Certainly."

"I should think," Judy said slowly, "that Dwight would have killed you, long ago."

Bella stroked Dwight's curly blond hair.

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She raised her head with a touch of arrogance. "He was afraid of me," she said a little proudly. "They all were—Clint and Miguel Pineda, too. I had to plan everything."

Judy Raynolds shivered, and Walt Hollenger put his arm tight around her. Bella took the glass of water Don Luis brought her, slipped a small white tablet from her breast pocket and washed it down with water before anyone could make a move to stop her.

She shoved Dwight Mitchell gently aside, and stood up. She was smiling again now, and if it hadn't been for what they had all learned about her in the past few hours, it would have seemed a gentle, sweet smile.

"May I use your bed, Don Luis?" she asked calmly. "This poison acts fast—and I'd like at least to die like a lady!"

A LONG, peaceful day had done much to dispel the horror in Judy Raynolds' clear blue eyes. She looked around the sunny kitchen, wishing in her heart that she would never have to leave. Since Myra Hollenger's accident two years before it had taken on the austere plainness of bachelor's quarters, but still it had an aura of living and loving about it that was lacking in the great stone hacienda on the Ventura.

She heard the rattle of wagon wheels and the sound of men's voices, and went to stand in the open doorway. Myra Hollenger's sewing dropped to her lap as she eyed the girl's straight, slender back.

"It's been nice having you here today, Judy," she said softly. "I hope you stay—a long time."

The girl turned, smiling. "I'd like to," she said. But she couldn't tell Walt's mother that under the circumstances her invitation was not enough. She couldn't tell her how different Walt had seemed this morning when he told her good-by—so distantly polite that all day she had wondered achingly if he was already sorry for the admission she had practically forced out of him the day before.

She stepped out on the porch. Walt Hollenger, in the seat of the now empty wagon that had that morning hauled a grim burden to the undertaker in Las Barrancas, slapped the reins across the backs of the team of bays, and the wagon crawled up the gentle slope of the creek crossing. Don Luis Morales and Rusty McGowan came riding on ahead.

Rusty pulled up by the porch. He grinned at the girl, swung out of the saddle, and his big hat came off with a flourish.

"We salute the new owner of the Ventura!"

Judy lifted her eyes to Don Luis, sitting straight and proud on one of Walt's high necked saddle horses.

"Not *me*?"

"Yes. Judge Sanchez was in town so we opened the will. Except for minor bequests—to me and to Rosina and Pedro Aragon—everything is yours."

"The ol' man wasn't such a fool," Rusty put in dryly. "Everything yours—in case he died a violent death. Otherwise Bella would have gotten a cool ten thousand in cash, an' you an' Dwight divided the rest."

Don Luis stepped from the saddle to stand at her side. "You don't look very pleased about it, Judy."

She rubbed a hand up over her forehead. "I—I guess it's just a little too big for me to swallow at one gulp. I—I won't know what to do with it."

Rusty grinned again. "Well, in case you ain't got any other bids—I wouldn't mind the job of showin' you."

"It is perfectly safe now for you to go home any time you like, Judy," Don Luis said gently. "Clint Barrow and Miguel Pineda are in jail for their part in the supposed Comanche raids. The sheriff saw the light of reason after Judge Sanchez and I talked to him. He even agreed not to try to get even with Johnny Hume for handling him and his deputies a little rough. I think you will have no more trouble."

Judy knew that Rusty's joking and Don Luis' gentleness were for the same purpose—to wipe from her mind the horrible memory of her first days on the Ventura—to make her feel that she had a home now, and friends.

WALT pulled the wagon up by the porch. "Hello, Judy," he said briefly. Then to Don Luis and Rusty: "Give me the reins, an' I'll put up the horses for you. You folks go on in. I won't be long."

He clucked to the team, and the wagon moved on. Judy looked after him, her throat tightening.

Rusty grinned at her slyly. "Well—it looks like all our troubles are over," he said. "Unless, Miss Judy, you start tryin' to put us ranchers off our land again."

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"Oh—no!" she protested, shocked that he could even think such a thing. "I wouldn't do that. I'll make out the deeds for them, every one of them, right away!"

Don Luis rubbed his hands together. "Good," he said smiling slightly. "That will save me the trouble—and embarrassment—of going to court and testifying against you."

Judy turned on him, her eyes widening. "Testifying against me?"

"I am convinced, Judy, that the claims of the small ranchers are right and legal. I have been digging into old books and maps for a year, trying to find the real story of the Buenaventura Grant. Just last week I think I found it."

He turned to Rusty. "You know where Zopolote Creek is?"

"Sure."

"There, instead of the Tecolote, is the original boundary of the Ventura on this side. The small ranches are all outside that."

He turned again to Judy. "You see, this is a big country—and there are lots of small creeks running through it. In the old days there weren't many people, and they didn't agree on the names of the creeks and mountains. Sometimes everyone had a different name for a creek. I am convinced that in Governor Armijo's time Tecolote Creek was the one we now call the Zopolote. I found an old diary of a man who surveyed the original Buenaventura Grant with Kit Carson. The description of the Tecolote tallies in every way with the Zopolote."

"Why—" Judy began slowly, her eyes brightening—"that's wonderful."

Don Luis swung the door open for her. "Will you go in, my dear?"

Judy looked at him as if she didn't even see him. "Later," she said, and stepped off the porch and started for the barn.

Rusty McGowan looked after her grinning. "If you need any help—just whistle!"

Judy broke into a run. Maybe she knew now what was the matter with Walt Hollenger. Men like Walt had lots of pride. He might be able to overlook all the money she had now, but he wouldn't like her having to hand him the deed to his own ranch as a present.

She crawled up on the corral gate and watched him unsaddle the two ponies.

"Walt, Don Luis says everything's settled."

Walt looked at her. "You want me to saddle you a horse?"

She didn't answer that. She kicked her heels idly against the corral post. "He says too," she said casually, "that he's found out for sure that none of the land on this side of Zopolote Creek belongs to the Ventura."

"Yeah, I know," Walt said.

Judy's heart sank. So that *wasn't* it. Walt finished unsaddling and came over and stood beside her.

"Judy," he said gently, "I don't want to hurt you—but all that money does make a difference."

Her throat felt so tight that she could hardly speak. "It doesn't to me," she interrupted him bitterly. "I didn't want it. I—"

Then she saw the look in his eyes that she had been waiting for, a look that was like a warm, loving arm thrown around her. She slipped down from the gate to stand beside him.

"Well?" she said softly.

Still he didn't take her in his arms. "Judy, you're so young—so beautiful—and with all that money you'll have a chance to meet lots of other men. You'd better—"

"Do you love me?"

He grinned. "My hands are dirty, an' I need a shave."

She sighed. "I'd better start getting used to that, if I'm going to marry a cowboy."

With Walt's arms tight around her, she plumb forgot to whistle for Rusty.

The End

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 88

1. Yes, readily enough that they can also coil and strike while afloat.
2. Because "his pa had married twice, and his new ma whipped him every day or two!"
3. Saloon, a Spanish word in common use in the Southwest.
4. New Mexico.
5. Spanish.
6. Kansas.
7. He means he examined the horse's teeth to determine its age.
8. Soldiering, since Kearney, Miles, Sheridan, Reno, Custer and Pike were all officers in the United States Army.
9. Boxes or other containers for packing supplies on a horse. Often either rawhide-covered or made entirely of rawhide.
10. Endurance.

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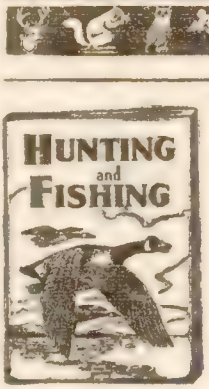

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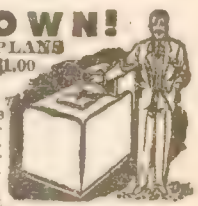


Every amateur will be proud to build this household necessity which requires no expert knowledge. Operates on 32 or 110 volts. There's fun in building and profit in operating this handy freezer. Saves up to 75%.

PLANS ARE SIMPLE

These 8 to 40 cubic foot sizes can be built of new or used parts. Mail $1 bill or check for complete plans and catalog.

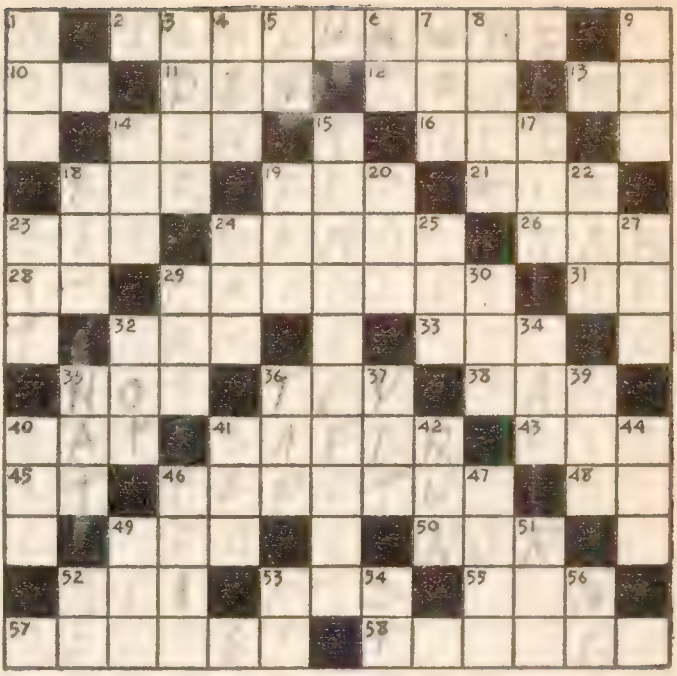
LEJAY MFG. CO., 466 LeJay Bldg., Minneapolis 8, Minn.

LOOSE DENTAL PLATES
RELINED AND TIGHTENED AT HOME $1

NEWLY IMPROVED DENDEX RELINER, a plastic, builds up (refits) loose upper and lower dentures. Really makes them fit as they should without using powder. Easily applied. No heating required. Brush it on and wear your plates while it sets. It adheres to the plates only and makes a comfortable, smooth and durable surface that can be washed and scrubbed. Each application lasts for months. Not a powder or wax. Contains no rubber or gum. Neutral pink color. Sold on MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE. Not sold in stores. Mail $1 for generous supply, brush and directions and we pay postage. *New Postage Rates—C.O.D. orders $1.34.*

DENDEX CO., 2714 S. Hill St., Dept. 70-G, Los Angeles 7, Cal.

THE WESTERNERS' Crossword Puzzle



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

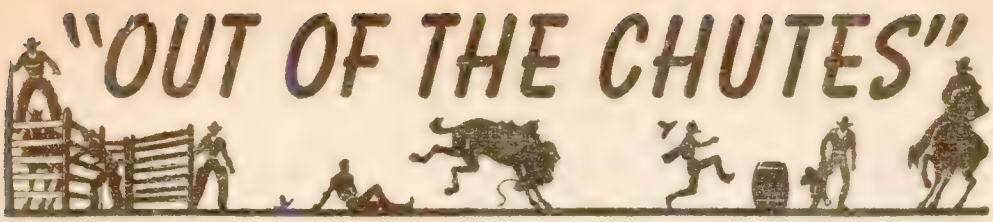
ACROSS

2. Indian hatchets
10. Either
11. A wild animal's lair
12. Hastened
13. Us
14. A small enclosure for animals
16. A quick inclination of the head
18. A public coach
19. Vim
21. To be successful
23. To obtain
24. A nobleman's estate
26. To damage
28. Preposition
29. Cylinders of tallow
31. To exist
32. To tap lightly
33. A rough mold of metal
35. Not cold
36. To attempt
38. A small cushion
40. A grain much-used by Scotchmen
41. More secure
43. A deep hole
45. Neuter pronoun
46. Evergreen, fruit-bearing trees of Central America
48. To depart
49. Conducted
50. Neither
52. To observe
53. Mountains (abbrev.)
55. A clamor
57. Wigwam
58. A shop-keeper

DOWN

1. A youth
3. Short, joyful poems or songs
4. Males
5. Article
6. Arabia (abbrev.)
7. Pale
8. To be informed
9. A low, coastal island
14. To place
15. A greenhorn
17. Not bright
18. To wager
19. To separate gold from gravel
20. Poland (abbrev.)
22. To snatch away
23. A goad for driving cattle
24. A small rug
25. A corded fabric
27. Crimson
29. A feline
30. To taste
32. A crucible
34. A cleft
35. A head covering
36. A gentle blow
37. Moreover
39. To excavate
40. Petroleum
41. Not happy
42. Moved swiftly
44. A pedal digit
46. To ooze out slowly
47. Saleratus
49. The sheltered side
51. To banish
52. Southeast (abbrev.)
53. Personal pronoun
54. Saint (abbrev.)
56. Northeast (abbrev.)

Solution to Second Oct. Puzzle



WITH TEX SHERMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: From coast to coast the contestants and the men who produce rodeo are Tex Sherman's friends, and this wide knowledge Mr. Sherman has placed at the disposal of readers of Ranch Romances. If you have a question about rodeo, write to Tex Sherman, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y., and enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Mr. Sherman will then send you a personal reply.

THE C.A.A. has put on a rodeo of its own at the Lakewood Stadium in North Long Beach, Calif. Just so you'll know, the C. A.A. is the Cowboys' Association of America of which K. C. Shumway is the live-wire secretary. They made a smart move at this show—raffled off a swell six-year-old, gaited saddle horse at a dollar a shot, which enabled somebody to get a fine horse dirt cheap.

The C.A.A. has a mimeographed newspaper which it sends to its members overseas.

Many top C.A.A. hands took part in the Diamond Bar Ranch rodeo at San Jacinto, Calif. R. F. Daniels took first money in the saddle bronc-riding and Don Wagner in the bareback bronc-riding. Mike Carmichael won the wild-cow-milking and Jake Yarborough the calf-roping. The hit of the show was the girls' calf-roping won by Mary Mask.

The other cowboys' organization is the Rodeo Cowboys' Association, formerly the Turtles. We hear that Don McCarty has just resigned as director of the C.A.A. and gone to them. Second and third places in the bulldogging were won by Chuck Mulhair and Bruce Bowler, the first time either of these boys ever took part in a bulldogging contest. If they can do this now, what will they do when they get the hang of throwing the old bull?

Cecil Cornish, well known rodeo contestant, barely escaped injury in a traffic accident in which his favorite educated horse, Silver Cloud, was killed, and Danger, his famous Brahma bull, hurt. Danger, however, is getting better. Cecil gave himself a break when he shipped his other horse, Smoky, ahead.

Here is a new one in the rodeo game. At the Yermo, Calif., rodeo Larry Riggins lost his saddle. He'd left his horse tied to a hitching post and someone just walked up and removed the saddle. Larry is pretty hot, and hopes he will run into someone riding it.

The Tulsa, Okla., rodeo gave out with a fine array of thrills and spills this year. And at Houston, Texas, they put on the best show in its history, according to Herman Engle, rodeo manager.

Here are the standings of the cowboys in line for the 1945 championship for the Rodeo Ass'n of America. Bud Linderman of Red Lodge, Mont., leads the list with 3,526 points. Bill Linderman, also of Red Lodge, has 3,294; Ken Roberts of Strong City, Kans., has 2,915; Toots Mansfield of Big Springs, Texas, 2,754; Louis Brooks of Sweetwater, Texas, 2,590; Homer Pettigrew of Springer, N.M., 2,558; Gerald Roberts of Young, Ariz., 2,311; and George Yardley of Roswell, N.M., 2,294. At this writing there's still a long way to go before the end of the year and any of these boys has a good chance to come out ahead. All the other listings were below the 2,000 mark.

E. N. Boylen, sheepman of Umatilla Co., Ore., has been chosen vice-president of the Rodeo Ass'n of America for the Seventh District. Mr. Boylen is well known in the rodeo game and is arena director of the Pendelton Roundup.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

TRAIL'S END ROLL CALL

From all points of the compass, members flock to the fold of the Trail's End Club. Welcome, newcomers!

Miss Mary Alexander, 7903 Glenwood, Dallas, 18. Texas
Miss Rejane Allard, Demers Centre, Quebec, Canada
Miss Opal Armstrong, 613 Highland Ave., Queensboro, Ky.
Mr. Ulis Burress, R.F.D. 1, Andersonville, Tenn.
Mr. Thurman Carmichael, Jr., Star Rt., Shubuta, Miss.
Mr. Nolan Chauvin, 1002 St. Anthony St., Florence, La.
Mrs. Elsie Hazel Church, Gen. Del., Crestline Rd., Pulaski, Va.
Miss Betty Cook, 1 Monash Rd., New Lambton, Newcastle, N.S.W., Australia
Miss Evelyn Marie De Beer, 4 First St., Raylton, Bulaways, S. R., So. Africa
Miss Joyce Dickinson, 625 So. Main, Richfield, Utah
Mr. Lewis E. Donahee, 5935 Kingsbury St., Dearborn, Mich.
Mr. William G. Dooley, 357 3rd St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga.
Mr. James Dorsey, Veterans' Facility, Augusta, Ga.
Miss Catherine R. Earl, 911 S. Campus Ave., Ontario, Calif.
Mr. Edward Gonsior, Box 61, Johnstown, Colo.
Mr. Elbert Hamrick, Webster Springs, W. Va.
Mr. Charles Clifford Hope, Rt. 1, Annona, Texas
Mr. Johnnie Hughes, West Creek, Colo.
Miss Eloise Puckett, 369 Wingfoot St., Rockmart, Ga.
Miss Heather McDougall, 14 Cintra Rd., Georgetown, Newcastle, N.S.W., Australia
Miss Peggy McDougall, 14 Cintra Rd., Georgetown, Newcastle, N.S.W., Australia
Mr. Lace L. May, R.D. 1, Rowlandsville, Md.
Miss Terry Mayer, Box 24C, Vosseller Ave., Martinsville, N. J.
Miss Ella Moore, Phillips St., Berea, Ky.
Miss Elaine Moreland, Room 260, West Village 24, Oak Ridge, Tenn.
Mr. Lewis Mott, Pineland, Texas
Mr. Bobby Gene Reed, Elizabethtown, Ill.
Miss Sheila Reid, 11 Portland Rd., Windward Rd. P. O., Kingston, Jamaica, B.W.I.
Miss Rosalie Reynolds, R.F.D. 1, Elmira, N. Y.
Mr. Allen Rice, 1417 E. 3rd St., Austin, Texas
Mrs. Pearl Rose, Bumble Bee, Ariz.
Mr. Wm. E. Rossman, 1117 E. Maple Ave., Adrian, Mich.
Mrs. Evelyn Rutherford, 1013 Garden St., Kalamazoo 21, Mich.
Miss Doris Pauline Selleys, 115 E. Westcote St., Liberty, Ind.
Miss Charlene Skipper, Highland Park, R.F.D. No. 1, Chattanooga, 4, Tenn.
Miss Beatrice Marie Smith, West Creek, Colo.
Mrs. Earl Albert Smith, c/o Supt., 2312 Loring Place N., Bronx, N. Y.
Miss Lois Sullivan, 4 Sherburne St., Sanford, Me.
Mrs. Harold O. Trefethen, 4 Sherburne St., Sanford, Me.

Until the war is over it will not be possible for us to offer Trail's End pins and buttons, for metal is now needed for war uses. However, it is still possible to become a member of the friendly Trail's End Club. All you have to do is fill out the coupon here below and send it in to the Trail's End Club, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22. N. Y. Your name will then be added to our membership rolls and published on the Trail's End page of the magazine.

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I wish to enroll as a member of the Trail's End Club of RANCH ROMANCES.

(Please print your name and address and check whether you are Miss, Mrs., or Mr.)

Miss
Mrs.
Mr. .....

Address .....

City ..... **State**..... 10-19-45

EDITOR'S NOTE: This page is composed of original cartoons, verse or prose pertaining to the West and written by amateurs only. For each contribution published we pay $2.00, and more than one contribution may be submitted by any person. Each contribution MUST be the original work of the person submitting it.

Address: The Amateur Page, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. No submissions will be returned nor can we enter into correspondence about them.

The author of the poem below tells us she was inspired by the picture across the top of the Amateur Page.

What's the Story?

HI, THERE, cowboy,
What's the story?
As you sit on the old top rail
Does your pencil take you dreaming,
'Mong pines along a silent trail?
To a little spread out yonder
Where crystal streams run deep and still?
What a pretty picture, cowboy,
Your Shangri-La beside a hill.
Will there be a fragrant meadow
Scattered with bright clover bloom,
Where contented doggies wander
And your cayuse may find room?
Will a charming bright-eyed Mollie
Be waiting near your cottage door?
And will a chubby buckaroo
Play with you upon the floor?
Hi there, cowboy!
What's the story?
As you sit on the old top rail,
Does your pencil take you dreaming
'Mong pines along a silent trail?

Julia K. Conrow, Trinidad, Colo.

Blessings on the Water-Hole

BELOW the high and rocky pass,
Below the summits bare of grass,
'Longside the gopher and the mole—
There lies the trusty water-hole.

Although the mountains give us gold,
And hunting for the hunter bold,
They could not play their Western rôle
Without the faithful water-hole.

So—next you kneel beside the drink
To dip your head beneath the brink,
Stop, and thank your living soul
There was a ready water-hole.

Jerry McCormick, Newburyport, Mass.

The Ranch Victory Garden

BUGS are in our garden,
Bugs are on the air,
Papa bugs, mama bugs,
Bugs everywhere.

Gay speckled lady bugs,
Such a jolly bunch!
Cute little 'tater bugs
Going out to lunch.

Bugs of many models,
Up to date and new,
Sassy gold and green bugs—
(I'm the bug that's *blue*).

Helen Folts, Lincoln, Nebr.

Stampeding the Cook

OUR old chuck wagon is plumb full
Of rangeland, cowhand chuck:
Potatoes, bacon, flour and lard,
And boxes of tinned truck.

There's soda, syrup, salt and beans,
Dried apples for our pie,
And coffee waiting to be boiled,
With canned goods stacked up high.

We have an ideal camping place
Close to a running brook,
But this cow camp is in a stew
'Cause we are minus a cook.

We craved fresh meat and killed a beef,
But the doggoned steak was tough;
It was a job to cut that meat—
We could hardly chew the stuff.

We told the coosie to "beat it"—
(Of course we meant that steak);
But he pulled stakes and lit a shuck
Like a locoed rattlesnake.

Gerald J. McIntosh, Little Rock, Ark.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department, provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended solely for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names. In accordance with the wishes of the War and Navy Departments, we print no letters to or from service men. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Pen Pal From Costa Rica

Dear Editor:

Wishing to know your country through correspondence, I should very much appreciate it if you could get me in touch with some of the readers of Our Air Mail in Ranch Romances, by publishing this letter. I should like to exchange impressions, postcards, etc., with them. I'm 25 years old, and have dark hair and green eyes. I am a Costa Rican, and I live in San José proper, capital of Costa Rica.

JOSE A. MORERA BATRES

Box 1002
San José, Costa Rica

Lonely Country Girl

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely girl who lives on a farm 4 miles north of St. Louis, Mich. There aren't any girls in my neighborhood that are my age, so I'd like very much to have pen pals. I'm 16 years old, have long, dark brown hair and brown eyes. My favorite sports are baseball and cycling, and my hobbies are raising different kinds of flowers and reading. I'd like to hear from an honest-to-goodness cowgirl or boy, and I'll send snapshots to all of my pen pals. Will be looking for letters, so please don't disappoint me.

MARY ELLIN MILLER

Rt. 2,
St. Louis, Mich.

Potential Song Writer

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely Southern girl from the old North State who would be very glad to get letters from all over. My one desire is to write songs. I'd like to hear from anyone interested in poetry and music, and I'd like to collaborate with someone who writes music, as I can write only lyrics or words to songs. My hobbies are listening to the radio, especially hill-billy and Western music, and I like to read and write letters, so please write me.

VIRGINIA MIDGETT

Sneads Ferry, N. C.

Come on, Cyclists

Dear Editor:

I've been reading your Ranch Romances for as long as I can remember, and always look forward to a new issue. Do you think a grade school girl at the age of 12 could get a letter printed in Our Air Mail? I am blond, with blue eyes, and I'm fairly tall. I'd like to hear from everyone who is interested in bicycle riding, horseback riding, and swimming. Come on, folks, write some letters to a lonely farm girl.

MONA BENSON

Champion, Nebr.

Ann Wants Some Mail, Too

Dear Editor:

I'm going to try once more to get my request for pen pals printed. I have black hair, brown eyes, and am 5 ft. 6 ins. tall. I'm 22 years old. My hobbies are baseball, horseback riding and collecting photos. Hurry, Pen Pals, and write to a very, very lonely girl.

ANN DAWSON

c/o Arch Dawson,
Moon, Ky.

Vermont Calling

Dear Editor:

Hello from Vermont. Would anyone care to be my pen pal? My hair is brown and my eyes are blue. I'm 5 ft. 5 ins. tall. I started reading Ranch Romances just recently, and I love it. My hobbies are collecting movie magazines and miniature figures. Favorite sports are horseback riding and swimming. I'd like to hear from boys and girls everywhere, between the ages of 14 and 20.

JOYCE CURRIER

17 School St.,
St. Johnsbury, Vt.

Scranton Again

Dear Editor:

May I ask for pen pals through your page? I would like to hear from people between the ages of 40 and 45 years old, from the Western states. I'll try and answer all letters.

ROSE MAISE

Box 523,
Scranton, Penna.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name ..... Sex.....
Address .....
.....
Exact date of birth: Year..... Month.....
Day of Month..... 10-19-45

MANY thousands of years ago an Egyptian astronomer, the great Ptolemy, wrote: "Whosoever may be adapted to any particular event or pursuit will assuredly have the star indicative thereof very potent in his nativity." Stripped down to modern language that simply means that we are what we are, and it can be seen in the stars that were in the heavens at the exact time of our birth. It does not mean that we are helpless in the face of these stars. It does not mean that you are, for instance, given to indecisiveness because at the moment you were born the Sun was in Pisces and the Moon in Virgo, which often suggests an indecisiveness of character. It does mean, though, that if you are a person who finds it hard to make up his mind, an astrologer will usually find that you were born under such a zodiacal situation.

"The fault lies, dear Brutus, not in our stars, but in ourselves," was the way Shakespeare put it. Given fore-knowledge of possible virtues and weaknesses by modern astrological methods, a person can be aware of his talents and improve upon them, of his faults and avoid them.

Let us take an example. General Eisenhower was born when the moon was in the sign of Scorpio, which is ruled by the planet Mars. This would indicate an aptitude for quick thinking, accurate judgment, an interest in involved problems. Mars is the war sign, and at Eisenhower's birth an astrologer might well have figured that he would be inclined to fight—for something. That the fight turned out to be of such proportions, no sign in any sky and no astrologer could possibly have foretold.

Now other children in the world were born under this same sign and their astronomical readings would be similar, though not exactly the same because the place of birth has a great deal to do with astrological figuring. These other children have had, in all likelihood, lives that would fit this same pattern. They may have fought in other ways and their ability to solve major problems has been applied to other things.

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Send me your booklet and full particulars about your course.

Name ..... AGE.....
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To be set to music. Send your song poem today for free examination by our staff headed by nationally famous hit composer of "DREAM A LITTLE DREAM OF ME." Our new 6 step plan is most liberal and complete ever offered. Write today for free booklet.

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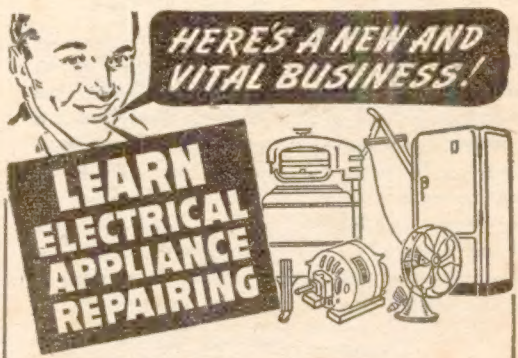
Dept. N Hollywood 28, California



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If you are mechanically inclined—can hold and use tools it will pay you to learn electrical appliance repairing. Operate from your garage, basement, etc. Work as many hours as you wish—the appliance repairman is his own boss. On many types of repairs it is usual for a repairman to charge on the basis of $5.00 to $6.00 an hour!

No Previous Experience Needed

Profusely illustrated our new course shows you in simple, easy to understand language plus drawings and photographs, how to make each repair on refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, motors, fans, irons, etc., etc. Explains and gives you a working knowledge of electricity, welding, nickel plating, etc. Shows you how to build the power tools you need and how to solicit and keep business coming to you. Not a theory course but an honest to goodness practical course written by and used by repairmen the country over. Price of course is so low that the savings on your own household appliances will pay for it. Act NOW! Send today for FREE literature. Christy Supply Co., 2835 N. Central Ave., Dept. D-312, Chicago 34, Illinois.

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the **practical use** of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show* you how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. *Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)

Scribe M.C.Y. The Rosicrucians, AMORC,
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

Name.....

Address.....State.....

HOW "JACK THE WEAKLING" SLAUGHTERED THE "DANCE-FLOOR HOG"!

SAY! YOU ALMOST KNOCKED US OVER!
OUCH!
LISTEN! I DANCE THE WAY I PLEASE! IF YOU WEREN'T A WEAKLING I'D PUSH YOUR FACE IN.
HA HA
NEVER MIND SEEING ME HOME FROM THE PARTY, JACK. YOU COULDN'T PROTECT ANYBODY!
BUT HELEN..
HANG IT! I'M SICK OF BEING A WEAKLING! I'LL SEND FOR CHARLES ATLAS' FREE BOOK AND FIND HOW TO BECOME A HE-MAN!
BOY! IT DIDN'T TAKE ATLAS LONG TO BUILD ME UP! NOW IF I SEE THAT BULLY AT THE PARTY TONIGHT, HE WON'T SHOVE ME AROUND!
LATER
YOU JUST BUMPED US AGAIN! THIS WILL TEACH YOU MANNERS!
HIT OF THE PARTY
OH, JACK, YOU'RE WONDERFUL!
WHAT A BUILD!

—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

I Can Make YOU A New Man, Too —in Only 15 Minutes A Day!

HAVE YOU ever felt like Jack — absolutely fed up with having bigger, huskier fellows "push you around"? If you have, then give me just 15 minutes a day! I'll PROVE you can have a body you'll be proud of, packed with red-blooded vitality!

"Dynamic Tension." That's the secret! That's how I changed myself from a scrawny, 97-pound weakling to winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

"Dynamic Tension" Does It!

Using *"Dynamic Tension"* only 15 minutes a day, in the privacy of your own room, you quickly begin to put on muscle, increase your chest measurements, broaden your back, fill out your arms and legs. This easy, NATURAL method will make you a finer specimen of REAL MANHOOD than you ever dreamed you could be!

You Get Results FAST

Almost before you realize it, you will notice a general "toning up" of your entire system! You will have more pep, bright eyes, clear head, real spring and zip in your step! You get sledge-hammer fists, a battering-ram punch—chest and back muscles so big they almost split your coat seams—ridges of solid stomach muscle—mighty legs that never get tired. You're a New Man!

FREE BOOK

Thousands of fellows have used my marvelous system. Read what they say—see how they looked before and after—in my book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Send NOW for this book—*FREE*. It tells all about *"Dynamic Tension,"* shows you actual photos of men I've turned from puny weaklings into Atlas Champions. It tells how I can do the same for YOU. Don't put it off! Address me personally: Charles Atlas, Dept. 910, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 910,
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."*

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... *State*.....

☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A

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CRIME DETECTION!

I have taught thousands of men and women this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let me teach you, too, *in your own home.* Prepare yourself in your leisure time, to fill a responsible, steady, well-paid position in a very short time and at very small cost. What others have done, you, too, can do.

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State Bureau of Utah
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